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ABSTRACT

Shaped by a survey that reached between 40,000 and 50,000 parents and teachers in Australia, this book identifies the main features of elementary schooling about which parents seek information and explains what is happening in Australia's classrooms at the present time. The book is presented as a resource and a stimulus for fostering the essential partnership that must exist between parents and teachers. Topics include: (1) parent-teacher partnership; (2) concerns of parents; (3) some basic truths about children; (4) reading, writing, spelling, drama, music, science; (5) homework; (6) television; (7) state-wide testing; and (8) characteristics of a good school. (RS)

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Barry Dwyer
Primary English Teaching Association

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Parents Teachers PARTNERS

Barry Dwyer

PRIMARY ENGLISH TEACHING ASSOCIATION

This book is dedicated to Lyn Wilkie, PETA's Business Manager from 1977 to 1988. Friend of teachers and link between homes and schools.

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Graham English's delightful cartoons lighten the text of a writer who is inclined to take himself a little too seriously on occasions.

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Barry Dwyer

How this Book began

Conscientious parents all around the world are concerned about the education of their children. They want them to get the most they can from their schooling and to grow up as happy, caring and useful people. And they expect schools to play an important role in helping this to happen.

However, like all of society's institutions, schools are changing. When parents compare their own experiences as pupils with those of their children, they sometimes find considerable differences. Quite reasonably, they wonder why changes have occurred and they seek explanations.

They also ask how they can best help their children, how they can monitor their progress in learning and how they can be active partners with their children's teachers.

It is for such parents that this book has been written.

It is part of a conversation which began in the middle of 1988 when the 17,000 members of Australia's largest professional association of teachers, the Primary English Teaching Association, were asked both to respond themselves and to survey parents in an attempt to discover their major concerns about primary schooling, the questions they would like answered and the topics they would like covered in a book written especially with them in mind.

A great many staffs took up the challenge, and at the same time parents were addressed directly through the newsletter of the NSW P & C Federation, which went out to some 23,000 members. So, on a conservative estimate, PETA's request reached between 40,000 and 50,000 parents and teachers.

Responses came in abundance from every state and territory in Australia — from places as far apart as St Lucia, Mooroolbark, Engadine, Ballarat, Jindera, Willetton, Aitkenvale, Canberra and Lower Plenty.

The result is *Parents Teachers Partners* — a publication that attempts to summarize the kind of response that Australian teachers generally would give to parental requests for information about what is happening in the nation's primary schools.

My only hope is that this book proves to be a useful resource for fostering the essential partnership that must exist between home and school if either is to do its job well.

Partnership is Essential

Some years ago, a NSW researcher, Dr Bill Moore, completed a most comprehensive study of a generation of Australian students. One of his major findings confirmed a strongly-held belief of many teachers.

'When home-based educational objectives clash with school-based objectives,' he reported, 'the student normally resolves the conflict by rejecting school.'

This is just one piece of a great mass of research which, for more than twenty years now, has underlined the importance of parents and teachers working together.

Today, it is generally accepted that when parents express confidence in the school and are involved with it in some way, their children are likely to be happier and perform better in the classroom. This may well be due simply to the lessening of distance between home and school. Young children see their parents and teachers sharing common beliefs, attitudes and goals. They therefore feel more secure and more purposeful.

Close links

Primary schools, in general, try to maintain very close links with parents. Once forged, these links have been found to result in:

- greater understanding by parents of their children's schooling
- greater understanding by teachers of the children and their needs
- better communication between home and school
- fewer crises and misunderstandings
- higher pupil morale and confidence
- more goodwill and mutual esteem between parents and teachers.

Home experiences

An important aspect sometimes overlooked in community discussions about education is that even the formal side of schooling *must* build on the home experiences of the child.

Children who come from homes that are rich in language — where people enjoy talking and listening to each other, where anecdotes are told and stories are read — have been wonderfully prepared for school learning generally, and particularly for reading.

Children who have been encouraged to ask questions, to make sense of their surroundings, to play imaginatively and to express themselves creatively, move naturally

and with confidence into school programs that develop their capacities for thinking and problem solving.

Children who have been encouraged to face challenges, who have been praised for worthwhile behaviour and who have experienced general approval and success, come to school with expectations that everything will be fine — and it usually is!

The Great Conversation

Teachers, then, build on the work already done by parents, who are the child's first and most influential teachers. True partnership is present when caring adults in both home and school work supporting each other in the interest of the child.

For this to happen, the channels of communication must be wide open, information must be freely available and the Great Conversation must take place.

The Concerns of Parents

The survey which has helped to shape this book asked parents to nominate general topics and more specific items or questions related to primary schooling. This produced a fascinating and most useful flood of responses.

What dominates everything else is a fundamental interest in *the teaching of reading.* Parents want to know how children actually learn to read, how this skill is taught at school, what they can do to help their children become better readers and what can be done to help those who seem to lack ability or interest.

The second major concern centres on what can be termed *the correct usage of English.* Parents are particularly interested in the teaching of *spelling.* They are aware that in recent times there have been changes in methods used and they want to know the reasoning behind these changes. Again, they ask for advice: 'What can I do to help my child become a more confident, efficient speller?'

Concern about correct usage is also revealed in many questions and comments about *grammar and punctuation.* Most parents seem aware of changes in the manner in which *writing* (written composition) is taught, but want more information about this and, in particular, about how the conventions of usage are appropriately taught.

Mathematics is the next great concern. Again, how is it taught today? Why the change from what we remember as pupils? How can children be helped?

A large proportion of respondents focus on an area that can be loosely termed *general curriculum.* Typical questions are: what should be taught in primary schools? Who decides on content and methods? Why have changes occurred in recent years? Is it possible to publish levels of achievement to be reached at the end of each grade?

In one way or another, most parents express interest in *the learning process.* How can children be motivated to want to learn? What conditions and methods favour learning? How are children grouped and how are classes organised to foster learning? And again, how can parents help? It is significant that parents generally seem well aware of the importance of building up the *confidence* and *self-esteem* of the child as a general strategy for helping him or her become a better learner.

Homework interests many parents — that is to say, the topic itself does! They want some explanation of the purpose of homework; and they make the distinction between homework that is useful and that which is simply a means of passing the time. Many want some indication of how much time should be spent on homework in each grade.

Much comment is also made on *discipline.* What is the general approach these days? Have standards of behaviour generally fallen? Where does discipline fit into the development of the child's character?

A very significant category to emerge is that of *home-school relationships*. Many questions are raised about the way in which parents could be involved in the life of the school. Many more centre on the issue of parent-teacher communication and ask for some treatment of this.

A final major category is *the evaluation of learning*. The key question, of course, is how do we know how the child is going. What is the current practice of reporting to parents? How do the teachers evaluate? What about testing? Have national standards declined?

Well over fifty smaller categories or topics are also nominated. These include *the aims of primary schooling, social adjustment, competition, creativity, provision for individual differences*, and so on.

Where possible, I've tried to make some reference to the variety of questions asked and topics mentioned, giving most weight to those that seem to be of more general concern.

> *A free curiosity is a greater encouragement to learning than a frightening compulsion.*
>
> St Augustine

The Child

At the very centre of the school's work is the individual child. Schools exist to help him or her grow up to become a happy, mature and useful adult. Parents and teachers, therefore, share the same task.

These days we know a lot about children. Parents observe them growing and learning from their earliest days; teachers too learn from observation, as well as from the study of child development during their professional training.

In this section I will identify some basic truths about children — truths that are well known by observant parents and teachers. They provide a set of common understandings from which we can go on to talk about today's school.

Well....What do we know about children?

Every child is unique. Children bring their own special qualities into the world. Their lived experiences and the actions of people who love them — and those who should, but don't — further develop these qualities. And, of course, they make decisions of their own which help determine the sorts of persons they will become.

The more children we see, the more we come to appreciate the marvellous variety of abilities, interests and characteristics that make each one special.

This specialness, this uniqueness, demands the respect of every parent and teacher.

Children are growing. That seems too obvious to be mentioned, doesn't it? You only have to take young Michelle or Michael along to the store for new shoes or shirts to realize this. They grow so quickly.

But they are not just growing physically. As each year passes, they develop new ways of thinking and solving problems; they are more able to manage their feelings, and their social skills improve. Growth is taking place in all aspects of their lives.

In each of these areas, some children grow more quickly than others. Some are very advanced; others are late starters who worry us for a while but, once on the way, seem to make up for lost time. Still others do not develop as we would hope and require extra understanding, patience and attention.

Growth is rarely steady. Periods of rapid change are followed by times when development seems slower and more predictable. And sometimes children seem to step back for a moment, say in their thinking or their ability to handle social situations, before making a great rush forward.

Parents and teachers have to allow for all of this.

Children pass through stages. Despite the uniqueness of children, there is something predictable about the way they grow. Special qualities set the pre-schooler apart from his older brothers and sisters in early primary school; and who would deny that teenagers are going through a period quite unlike any experienced so far in their life's journey?

Individuals reach these special stages at different times. In any one class teachers have to make allowance for a wide range of maturity levels, interests and readiness to tackle new challenges.

Children want to know. Parents of even the smallest toddler will agree that there is something in the *nature* of children that makes them curious, active, searching individuals.

Given half a chance, they will spend most of their time exploring their surroundings, testing the properties of things, trying to find out what happens when.... They will be this way unless they are made to mistrust others, to doubt themselves or to be afraid.

Children have basic needs. Children spend their time trying to meet the normal needs of every human being. When these needs are not met they feel frustrated and unhappy, and often display anger and other annoying behaviour.

All children need:

to be physically cared for
They must have food and liquid, warmth and sleep, and protection from danger.

to be accepted and loved
They must have people around them who show them love and who make them feel that they belong. They need reassurance that they are very special and that in the end everything will be all right.

to succeed
They require the inner strength to meet challenges, to master new tasks and to be convinced that 'I can do it!'

to make sense
They have to be able to know things, to find meaning and order, and to express what they have found out by using language, play, drama and art.

Play is vitally important. The famous Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget, once remarked, 'Play is the child's work.' Parents and teachers who observe children are continually amazed by the importance of play in their life. It seems to be their natural way of learning about the world and their place in it.

Through play, children learn to get along with other children. Make-believe play, particularly, helps them to come to terms with their emotions and to work through personal problems.

And play is especially important in learning because it gives them the opportunity to experiment with ideas, practise different skills and develop concentration.

Children are natural learners. As every parent knows, children are learners from the earliest age. They are *born* learners; learning is what they do best.

The sort of learning that comes naturally to children is the sort that requires them to be active, curious, probing, problem-solving individuals who want to know *why* and *how* things happen and who want to be able to *do* something themselves.

This learning has provided them with important skills for dealing with the world long before they come to school. By age five they have learnt a language — no small feat! — along with a host of physical and social skills.

Children of all ages are continually learning information and skills. They are also learning *attitudes* — to themselves, to others and to the world in general. These attitudes are extremely important because they affect later learning.

Maria, for instance, has learnt that reading is boring and she is not very good at it. Peter has learnt to associate mathematics with an impatient teacher and a high level of stress. Annette has learnt that writing is fun and that with stories come praise and feelings of success. So much of learning to read, write and handle mathematical challenges depends on the *learned attitudes* children bring to the task.

Children need:	Adults help meet these needs when they:
• to be physically cared for	• provide nutritious food • ensure a good night's sleep • protect children from unnecessary danger
• to be accepted and loved	• show their love by hugs and words • give children time • express approval and praise
• to succeed	• provide challenges suited to the level of the child • help children develop confidence and skill • acknowledge effort
• to make sense	• talk with children • encourage them to express ideas and feelings • allow them time to wonder and reflect

The social side of learning

Learning is very personal. Children have to make sense of their own experiences by thinking about them and relating them to what they already know.

But learning has a social side as well. We all learn from and with each other. When Ben watches his older brother, Craig, ride his skate board and listens to his advice, he is being helped to master a skill.

Similarly, when he works with a partner or in a group in class, he is learning from and teaching someone else.

Today's school promotes this kind of learning in the way it groups children and has older children working with younger ones, and by welcoming parents and other adults into classrooms where they share their interests and skills.

'Now, there's a good point!' Sharing a reference book adds to the excitement of discovery.

Children are thinkers

Part of being educated is learning to think clearly and critically.

As they get older, children's thinking naturally changes. They grow in their ability to name and classify things, for instance, and to put them in order. Towards the end of primary school they become more adept in handling abstract ideas.

The quality of their thinking and their learning, however, can deteriorate when they are under stress and facing new situations. Adam, for example, has just started at a new school and is worried about making friends. His parents notice that his work lacks the quality that was so obvious in his previous class, but once he settles in, they will see him recover lost ground.

Language

When teachers use the term *language*, they are usually referring to talking, listening, reading and writing. Obviously, language is a very important part of the curriculum.

None of the four elements of language stands alone. How well a child will learn to read and write depends, to a very large extent, on how well he or she has learnt to talk and listen.

Learning to talk and listen is part of growing up at home before coming to school. It happens naturally within the family and doesn't require any special lessons.

Parents who talk with their children about the everyday things of life, who tell them stories, who listen to them and ask them questions, who show pleasure in using language, are laying the strongest foundations for later learning.

In homes where English is not used with fluency, it is just as important for children to be 'soaked' in language.

Sarina and Joe speak halting English, but, of course, they are beautifully fluent in their mother tongue — Italian. They should not hesitate to use their Italian in instructing, entertaining and, in general, parenting young Rita and Lou. The children's *first* need is for a rich language experience. Later they will learn English, and they will learn it all the better for having had the enriching experience of sharing the language with which their parents are most comfortable.

Children will learn best when...

- They feel confident because of previous experiences of success.
- They are expected to learn.
- Their natural curiosity is aroused.
- They are active and involved — discovering, solving problems, explaining what they are doing....
- They feel safe.
- They feel challenged.
- They are mature enough to master the task.
- The task is interesting and makes sense.
- They have the opportunity to observe and imitate others.
- They have plenty of chance to practise.

Getting ready — for what?

So many very conscientious parents wonder if they are providing their children with every opportunity. They are prepared to spend money on anything that will give their youngsters a running start in what they see as the rat-race of life. And they become anxious if there is not constant evidence of achievement.

They see a good pre-school as preparation for primary school, which in turn is preparation for high school. High school gets you ready for university, which prepares you for — real life!

While we all want our children to do well and enjoy the fruits of dedication, we can easily miss a very important truth that was put quite simply some years ago by the British Plowden Report: 'The best preparation for being a happy and useful man or woman *is to live fully as a child!*'

I was reminded of this recently which I came across the following comments by a famous psychologist:

> The child is constantly confronted with the nagging question: 'What are you going to be?' Courageous would be the youngster who could look the adult squarely in the face and say, 'I'm not going to be anything; I already am.'
>
> We adults would be shocked by such an insolent remark, for we have forgotten, if indeed we ever knew, that a child is an active, participating and contributing member of society from birth.
>
> Childhood isn't a time when he is moulded into a human who will then live life; he is a human who is living life.
>
> No child will miss the zest and joy of living unless these are denied him by adults who are convinced that childhood is a period of preparation.
>
> David Elkind, *The Hurried Child*

Case study

Young Peter has packed a lot of living into his ten years of life.

From the time he's up in the morning until he sinks exhausted into bed at night, it's all go, go, go!

Winter is his most intensive season. He plays Saturday football with the Tuggarah Tigers and this requires training during the week; he is also very involved in Junior Ten-Pin Bowling. But the thing that really takes the most time is gymnastics, which draws him to the Athletics Centre three nights a week.

At home he's always either on the skateboard or trying to get enough kids together for a quick football game on the vacant land before it gets too dark.

Alan is proud of his son. 'I read somewhere that play is the child's work,' he says. 'So Peter must be the best little worker this town has ever seen.'

As Mum drives Peter and his brother and sister from sporting field to sporting field, she has moments of doubt.

She remembers her own relaxed childhood when she played 'houses' with her friends, looked after her pets, had her other hobbies and loved nothing better than a good read before lights-out. But, then, Peter's a boy; and Alan's fast-lane life doesn't seem to have done him any harm. Or could things be different?

How do you react to this story? What do you consider to be a full and enriching life for a child?

The child's self-concept

This is the most important single factor affecting all behaviour and, perhaps more than anything else, determines how successful the experience of school will be.

What we do at any moment of our lives is influenced by the way we define ourselves. When children give themselves answers to the questions —

Who am I?

What abilities do I have?

What weaknesses do I have?

What am I worth as a person?

— they are, in fact, articulating their self-concept.

Some things we know about self-concept

1 It's the way we see ourselves — the good, the bad and the ugly things that make up this person called 'me'.

2 It is created for us by the significant people in our lives — parents, teachers, brothers and sisters, classmates....

3 We play a part in developing our own self-concept. We do this in a very positive way when we exercise our various talents.

4 We develop our self-concept when we are compared, and when we compare ourselves, with others. This has very important implications for schooling.

5 Our self-concept improves when people express love, affection and approval to us.

6 People with strong self-concepts are more likely to learn new skills and master new challenges because they are secure enough to take risks and extend themselves.

7 People with strong self-concepts usually find it easier to handle social situations.

8 Our self-concept changes as a result of our experiences.

Confidence

One of the products of our self-concept is the confidence we display in approaching new challenges. A fragile self-concept is often revealed in the child who holds back, disabled by doubt.

'Come on!' we say. 'You can do it!'

But the response is so often a hanging of the head, a refusal to take a chance, another opportunity lost.

Yes, lack of confidence is one of the great barriers to successful learning. Every attempt to help a child must be grounded in the conviction that our success, right from the start, depends on how well we establish and maintain the confidence of the child in him/herself.

Children who lack confidence have yet to learn that...

- **Making mistakes is an essential part of learning.**
- **Important people love us for what we are, not for what we can do.**
- **We all have so many skills that we haven't yet discovered.**
- **Being successful means doing the best you can, not being better than other people.**

Here are some of the many ways in which caring adults can help children to be more confident individuals and, therefore, more successful learners and happier human beings.

1 Both at home and at school, provide a climate of safety. The child must learn that it's okay to make mistakes, that trying and not succeeding straight away is part of learning.

2 Focus on whatever achievement there is, and praise it. Don't be reluctant to express encouragement and delight.

3 Take the children's interests and activities seriously. Talk about them; share your own childhood stories. Let the youngsters see that their experiences are valuable. When they have received that message, they will know that they themselves are valuable.

4 Make sure that the challenges you offer are realistic. Nothing succeeds like success and the more success children have, the more confidence they bring to a new task.

5 Be on the look-out for any special strengths — an ability to draw, a pleasant singing voice, an unusual turn of phrase in story-writing — and build on these with praise and new opportunities.

6 Think seriously about the place of competition in the life of the child. Is his or her success continually being defined by comparison with other children? For all but the winners this can be most destructive. Despite what some people might think, an individual's success in life, in the things that really matter, does *not* depend on being faster, stronger and smarter than other people.

And so to School...

The beliefs about children and learning outlined in the last section are an essential part of the foundation of the modern primary school.

Like the family, the school exists to promote the *growth* of its members. Its programs of learning and, more importantly, the caring relationships that exist within it, should foster the development of the intellect, the feelings, the body and the spirit of every child.

The primary school is not just a place where knowledge is transmitted and skills are taught. It is a community where wholesome attitudes and values are developed and where individual pupils learn to live fully, first, as children, working, playing and growing at their own pace.

The school seeks to provide abundant opportunities for children to experience success and to increase their self-confidence by accepting challenges and extending themselves.

Through a good primary school program, the child learns to inquire, to reflect, to make *sense* of experiences, to communicate thoughts and feelings and to work cooperatively with others.

For this kind of constructive learning to take place, a judicious balance of freedom and discipline is essential in every classroom.

The curriculum

When I first started teaching, back when the world was young, I was handed a thick book with a blue cover. It was called the *Curriculum for Primary Schools* and it governed the professional activities of teachers of my generation.

The book has gone and so has the understanding of the word 'curriculum' as the collection of the *subject content* of schooling.

Today's curriculum can't be put into a book. The term is applied broadly to include not only what is taught, but how it is taught, how children are organised for learning, what experiences they have and how the learning itself is evaluated.

When teachers write home to say that they are 'developing the curriculum' during staff meetings or in-service sessions, they mean that they are asking themselves fundamental questions about what they are teaching, and why, and to whom.

Education authorities provide curriculum guidelines rather than very specific directions about what must be taught. These guidelines generally reflect the best information currently available about particular areas of learning such as mathematics or language.

Teachers, working in school teams, decide how these guidelines can be best applied so as to meet the needs of the children in their school.

They identify basic principles, set themselves objectives, decide on appropriate teaching and learning activities, consider how they will evaluate and report to parents, and determine how all of this will be coordinated throughout the school. This is often called *policy development*, and many schools involve parents in this important work.

Integrated learning

Primary teachers do not see learning as something that can be neatly boxed into separate subjects.

They know, for instance, that when a child is working with a group on a science experiement, he or she might well be questioning and explaining, writing down observations, drawing graphs, calculating results, consulting references and so on.

Learning here crosses all subject boundaries. Teachers call this *integration;* they value it greatly and go out of their way to plan for it to occur. It is sometimes referred to as 'learning across the curriculum'.

The major learning areas

For the sake of convenience, classroom programs are usually developed in each of the major learning areas, although some teachers favour direct planning for integrated learning.

All Australian states identify similar major learning areas, though the terminology differs slightly. The accepted areas are:

Language (comprising Talking, Listening, Reading and Writing)

Mathematics

Science and Technology

Human Society and the Environment (usually called Social Studies)

Creative and Practical Arts (including Music, Visual Arts and Craft)
Health and Physical Education.

Drama is listed under either Language or the Creative and Practical Arts. A very large number of schools provide Media Education programs.

Some important abilities

Eventually, our children will take their places as adult members of the community.

The educationist, Herbert Kohl, nominates five basic abilities that people need if they are function effectively and compassionately in a democratic society.

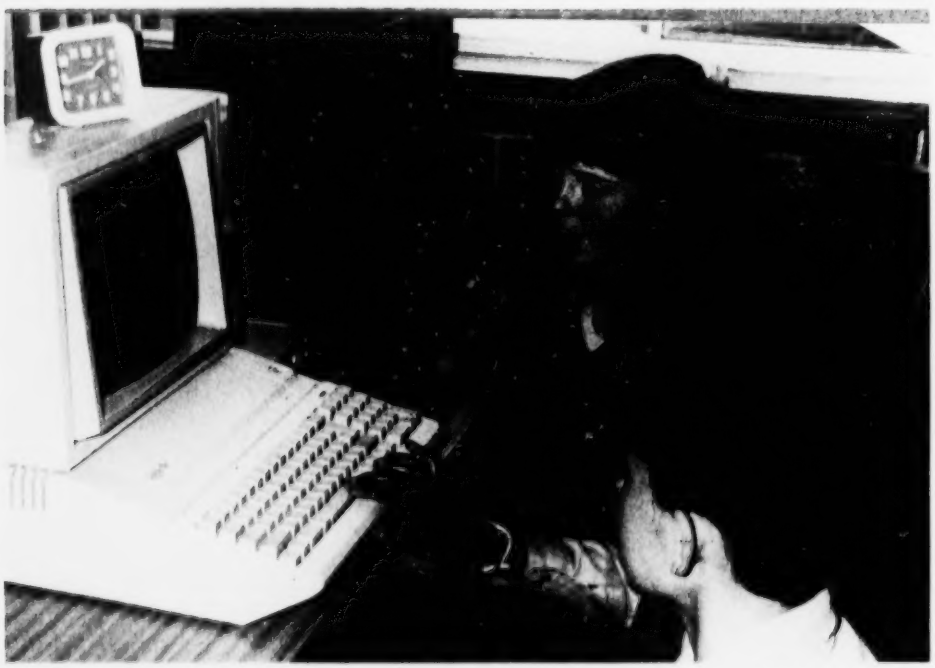
1 The ability to use language well and thoughtfully.

2 The ability to think through a problem and experiment with solutions.

3 The ability to understand scientific and technological ideas and to use tools.

4 The ability to understand how people function in groups.

5 The ability to know how to learn something yourself.



The classroom computer can help develop the five basic abilities nominated by Herbert Kohl.

Kohl's neat summary suggests a set of challenging educational aims for every teacher and parent. But we must remember that ability in itself is never enough; it must be cultivated and used.

Good school programs, therefore, are designed to help each child to develop and use each of these abilities to the full.

Your Expectations of School

Give each of the following a ranking.

A - my top priority (limit of 3)
B - quite important
C - nice but not necessary
D - no thanks!

I want school to help my child become:

obedient	self-disciplined
a good speller	well-balanced
able to solve problems	smartest kid in class
self-confident	easy to get on with
caring and sensitive	creative and imaginative
respectful to adults	a good reader
good at maths	good at sport
happy	curious
adaptable	a good writer
competitive	able to think for him/herself
enthusiastic	other (specify)

Look back over the list. How would you sum up your expectations of school?

One parent's hopes

Among the many responses received from parents during the PETA survey, one stands out as being of particular interest.

Margaret Moore, of the NSW town of Bodalla, outlined her hopes for the primary schooling of her children.

In publishing part of her letter, I invite you, the reader, to consider your own answer to this very important question:

What do you want your children to get from their primary school experience?

You may find that you will clarify your thoughts by committing them to writing. But let's hear Margaret Moore.

- I want my children to be able to read, write, spell and calculate effectively, but I don't want them taught by people who see everything else as peripheral, and these as the 'nuts and bolts' for which everything must be sacrificed.
- I want my children's curiosity preserved and nurtured so that they still 'want to know' when they start high school.
- I want my children to have space to make choices and decisions about their learning — both what and how.
- I want my children to learn how to learn and to be reflective about their own styles of learning.

- I want my children to be exposed to many points of view (not just middle-class teacher viewpoints) so that they learn tolerance and independent thought. (This can happen if schools draw on the expertise, experience and enthusiasms of their communities.)
- I want my children to learn basic research skills, including note taking and presenting information in their own words.
- I want my children to have teachers who make a point of hearing and respecting them, and who use me to gain an understanding of my children. (Regular parent-teacher interviews could help here, where parents tell the teacher as well as the other way round.)
- I want my children taught for their individual strengths and weaknesses, as individuals.
- I want my children to experience lots of music (making and listening), lots of poetry, stories and plays, lots of craft and art (making and seeing), lots of *active* maths, science and social science — so they see a much wider world than the town we live in.
- I want my children to develop a sense of self-esteem and a sense of their ability to have a go at everything whether they excel or not.
- I want my children's achievements to be recognised generously and compared only with their own past performance.

Theory into practice

So far we've looked at basic beliefs about growing and learning that comprise some of the 'theory' of modern primary schooling. Needless to say, this is also the theory that successful parents have learnt from observing their own children.

How does it translate into practice? A classroom based on such foundation principles and beliefs will look like this.

1 Children are involved in a lot of hands-on activity — learning by doing!

2 While there are quiet times for reading and other individual work, there is also considerable talking as the children make sense of their experiences by discussing them.

3 Provision is made for the fact that children are not all the same. Thus, at any one time, different children may well be working on different tasks.

4 The program is designed to ensure that all children experience success, and that the more able ones are challenged.

5 There is plenty of opportunity for children to work cooperatively in pairs and in groups, planning, sharing ideas, helping others and being helped in turn.

6 Children are encouraged to ask questions, to relate experiences and to express their opinions and feelings.

7 Children have plenty of opportunity to investigate, solve problems, communicate their findings, and express themselves in drama, art, dance, etc.

8 Individuals — adults and children — are respected. Their ideas, feelings, opinions and constructive ways of doing things are valued.

9 Play is used as a means of learning and expressing oneself.

10 There is a workable balance of freedom and discipline within a stimulating environment.

A good classroom is a place where...

- Children feel safe and happy.
- There is a sense of both challenge and achievement.
- People feel as if they belong.
- Children are learning how to learn.
- A wide range of learning experiences is provided.
- Individuals are allowed to learn at their own pace.
- Parents and teachers feel that they are genuine partners.

What would you care to add to this list?

The interaction between teacher and learner is at the heart of schooling. The quality of this relationship is the most important single factor in learning.

SA Dept of Education

If children are apparently unable to learn, we should assume that we have not as yet found the right way to teach them.

Bullock Report

Reading

Reading is the process of getting meaning from print. It doesn't begin with or depend on knowing the alphabet or knowing the 'sounds'. It is all about *making sense.*

Readers make sense of print by:

- drawing on their experience of the subject matter and the flow of language to predict the meaning of new words
- calling on their memory of the shapes of words or parts of words
- applying their knowledge of the 'sounds' of letters and combinations of letters.

So they search for meaning, using a variety of clues to make predictions, to test them and to keep the flow of meaning going.

Focus of reading

Good readers come to the task of reading *expecting* the text to make sense. They have developed the knack of anticipating what is coming. They may wrongly identify individual words but they don't lose the meaning.

They are not locked into word-by-word reading. They have developed skill in skimming, in searching for sense, in testing their hunches and in holding it all together. This is called the process of reading.

As children master it, their enjoyment increases and they wish to read more. And the more they read, the more proficient they become.

Poor readers, on the other hand, are not skilled in looking for sense — in fact, many do not even realize that this is what reading is. So they will guess wildly, or painfully try to 'sound out' unfamiliar words without making any use of all the clues in the surrounding print.

'The sailor waved from the deck of his ship', says the text.

Karl labours on painfully: 'from — the — deck — of — his — s — sh — *sheep*!'

Reading begins at home

Reading, as I have already pointed out, is *one* aspect of language. It is very closely related to talking, listening and writing.

In fact, a child's ability to read depends to a very large extent on the quality of language experiences he or she has enjoyed at home before even commencing school.

A home rich in language — where people love words and stories, where tales are told and books are read, where parents model interesting speech and are seen

to be readers and writers, and where children are just expected to be the same — such a home prepares the child to move naturally and inevitably into reading.

Now, there is a very significant secret here that I want to reveal.

Some years ago, Mrs Margaret Thatcher appointed a committee of inquiry to investigate the teaching of reading and the other uses of English in British schools. It produced a massive report entitled *A Language for Life*, which is probably the most significant official document yet produced on the teaching of English.

Amongst the committee's considerations was the question of how children can be best introduced to the skill of reading. Its report makes this vitally important point:

> It has been said that the best way to prepare the very young child for reading is to hold him on your lap and read aloud stories he likes, over and over again. The printed page, the physical comfort and security, the reassuring voice, the fascination of the story: all these combine in the child's mind to identify books as something which hold great pleasure.
>
> *This is the most valuable piece of advice that a parent can be given.*

Millions of parents have heeded this advice over the years. A recent summary of all relevant research says they have been wise to do so.

We would dramatically improve the standard of reading of Australian children — and consequently their standard of learning — if only we could persuade all parents to read regularly to their children from the earliest age.

Successful readers

Given what is known about reading, it is reasonable to suggest that the children most likely to be successful readers are those who:

- are fluent users of oral language
- have learnt that stories and books are sources of enjoyment
- have some knowledge that marks on a page can carry meaning
- have adequate perceptual skills
- have patience and are able to concentrate for reasonable periods.

Hints on reading to a child

1 Build story-reading into a regular routine. Perhaps it can become part of the bedtime ritual that the child looks forward to and that can later develop into personal, quiet reading every evening before lights-out.

2 Involve the child in selecting the story or book.

Sharing the classroom story is the natural extension of shared reading at home.

To prepare children to read...

- Talk to your children from the earliest age. Surround them with language: explain, question, read....
- Encourage them to talk about their own experiences, to play with words.
- Tell and re-tell stories of all kinds. Have a bed-time ritual of story-reading.
- Encourage the children to 'read' with you. Get them to comment on the illustrations. Run your finger underneath the print as you read.
- As you read favourite stories, leave out the occasional word and encourage the children to put it in.
- Make simple word games, such as cutting words from magazines and matching them with pictures.

3 Relax. Sit the child on your knee or by your side, or make sure that he or she is lying comfortably in bed.

4 Try to ensure that the child can see all the pictures. These help a young reader to follow and predict the story.

5 Talk about the cover, the illustrations, and the story's title before you begin.

6 With a beginning reader, sometimes run your finger under the print to show that your voice flows with the line of type.

7 After the story, or when there is a natural break, talk about it for a minute or two. Without destroying the magic, you might ask questions like these.

Why do you think he did that?

I would have liked to have seen that, wouldn't you?

What would you have done if...?

What would have happened if...?

Hearing children read

As well as reading to their children, parents should listen to them read. These two practices are an incredibly powerful combination, and older children, as well as younger, can benefit from regular reading to interested adults.

Don't confine the activity to the reading of stories. Search for poems, newspaper articles, entries in reference books — anything in which both reader and listener share an interest.

We should remember that reading is not just a technical skill to be mastered. It can give great enjoyment, stimulate discussion and lead to deeper understanding.

Parents who are not comfortable with English can also share the reading experience with their children. Many children's books in languages other than English are now readily available. Sharing stories in the mother tongue of the family can help strengthen bonds between parents and children. And sharing books written in English can help migrant parents improve their English-speaking skills.

Hints on hearing a child read

1 Establish a routine. If possible, share some reading every night or every second night.

2 Keep the sessions reasonably brief (perhaps ten minutes).

3 Talk about the story before reading begins. Discuss the cover, the illustrations, the relevance of the story to the child's own experiences. In other words, generate both interest and *language* about the topic.

4 Be as supportive as you can and praise every achievement — trying hard, guessing intelligently, reading with enthusiasm, finishing the chapter....

5 Don't, whatever you do, become impatient. When the child stops at an unfamiliar word:

you say the word immediately and tell him or her to keep reading

or

count quickly to ten and then give the word

or

urge the child to guess the word from the context or by using the first letter as a clue, and then come back if it doesn't make sense

but

don't insist on the child 'sounding out' every new word

and

don't get angry.

6 Try to make the sessions as enjoyable and rewarding as you can. Remember, the aim is to help the child *enjoy* reading and associate it with feelings of relaxation and success.

Not a contest

It is a great shame that many people spoil the pleasure of learning to read because they turn it into some sort of a contest.

Comparisons are made between children, who are then urged to move quickly onto the next book in some reading scheme and so prove their superiority over relatives and friends.

In such an atmosphere the excitement and pleasure can be lost for ever and reading becomes a chore, with everyone concentrating on the rate of progress and measurable results.

The irony is, of course, that the child who moves along *at his or her own rate*, enjoying the stories, developing the reading habit, and gradually becoming more skilled and more appreciative, ends up being a far better reader than if he or she had been forced into some crazy race.

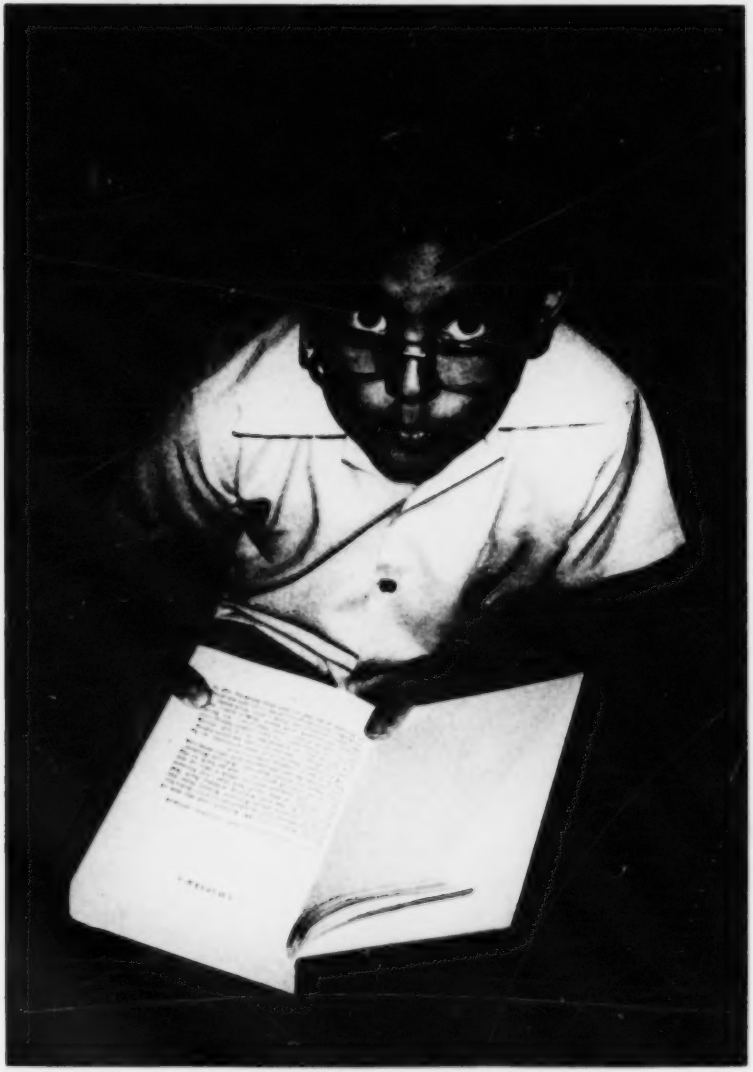
Parents naturally want to know how their child is progressing, but because reading is so much more than a narrow technical skill, there is no test or single measure that can give them a useful answer.

The best way of deciding how a child is going in reading is simply to observe. These questions might be useful.

Does he or she enjoy reading?

How much reading is done?

What books are read?
Can he or she use books for different purposes? To get information, for pleasure..?
How does the child tackle unfamiliar words?
How confident is the child as a reader?



Caught in the act!
The best readers are those who just love reading.

Assessing reading

Many people are very impressed by scores in reading tests, reading ages and the like. But not everyone. Here is one teacher-parent who casts a cynical eye on the testing industry and offers parents an alternative.

'What kind of reader is my child?' wonders a typical parent.

There are so many measuring devices that have been created to answer just that question!

Kids can be given 'diagnostic tests', 'comprehension tests', and 'word recognition tests'; 'miscue analyses' can be made and we can even identify 'complex perceptual problems', 'auditory channel deficits' and 'psycholinguistic strategies for extracting meaning'... Phew!

Results can be recorded in standard scores, reading ages, deciles, percentiles, stanines, and a whole host of gobbledegook terms that serve to convince the ordinary parent and teacher that s/he's a dope, should apologise for having asked, and should leave it all to the highly trained professionals who are 'in the know'.

Let me strike a blow for parents' liberation by offering a simple instrument that tells the typical Mum and Dad more than all the testing material in the world lumped together...

On my desk, at this moment, sit three small cards stapled in one corner. I've just found them as I've been rummaging through bundles of papers and books in my never-ending search for lost glasses.

They are 9-year-old Marie's library cards from last year — and this is the first time I've taken the trouble even to glance at them.

They are rich in information.

I see that she borrowed some seventy books during the year. The first was a Beatrix Potter story called *Ginger and Pickles*. Hot on its heels came *Puddle Duck* and *The Tale of Wicked Ladies* (No, not the book you recall being banned in a certain northern state!).

By March she had discovered Enid Blyton's *Noddy*, *Mr Pinkwhistle*, and *Naughty Amelia Jane*.

Something must have happened that month because the borrowing pattern changed from one a week to one every three days. Skimming and speed-reading had apparently been mastered in response to the urgent need to keep up with the exciting storyline.

Enid Blyton reigned supreme during April and May as no fewer than twenty Christmas holidays were shared with the 'Secret Seven' and the 'Famous Five' — those youngsters who seem to have captured the elusive secret of eternal youth!

By June, Marie was reading books like *Encyclopaedia Brown* and *Basil of Baker Street* but returned regularly for more 'astonishing' adventures with Enid Blyton's anti-Golliwog racists of the nursery.

In August the real breakthrough came with the card listing in quick succession *Ballet Shoes*, *Paddington Bear*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *Mr Popper's Penguins*.

By November a pattern had been well established for the borrowing of quality children's literature, with occasional retracing of steps for nostalgic visits to the world of Beatrix Potter and her friend Peter Rabbit...

And the point of all this? Well, haven't I found the answer to my original question?

What battery of tests, standardised scores, reading ages or exam marks could tell me more about this little girl as a reader? I herewith challenge any Reading Authority to show me how such a battery could be superior.

Now, I know that a very small minority of children have special difficulties and that, for these, some specialised diagnosis and help might be necessary. However, the parents and teachers of the great majority of children would be wise not to take the testing/measuring game too seriously.

How are our children going in reading? Well, let's begin to answer that question for ourselves by sitting down with them, once in a while, and just talking with them about the books they read. And if they aren't currently reading much? Well, the problem then is to interest them — a problem that is not solved by testing.

'A Reading Measure that Measures Up', in *This Works for Me!* (PETA, 1982)

The child who can't read

The problems faced by the non-reader moving through primary school are very serious indeed.

Increasingly, the various learning areas require the pupil to be able to read. Failure in reading, therefore, leads to failure in school generally. And with this comes further loss of confidence and a depressing image of oneself as a very poor learner.

I made the point earlier in this book that reading begins at home and that a language-rich home usually produces a child who picks up the skills involved in reading very quickly. But this does not apply in every case. The causes of reading problems are often very complex and parents should not feel guilty or inadequate if their child is experiencing difficulties. The important thing is to acknowledge the problem and decide to do something about it.

But why is it that a normal, healthy child of nine or ten or even older can't read?

Some of these children, for one of many possible reasons, have had unpleasant early experiences with reading; the natural inclination has been to 'turn off', to show no interest, and even to refuse help.

Others have some specific physical problem with, for instance, their visual or auditory perception.

Whatever the cause, every poor reader has a sense of failure which has to be overcome if he or she is to succeed.

Here are some very basic principles for any person who wishes to help a non-reader.

Announce a new start. We're going to forget the past, the old methods that

haven't worked. We're going to learn to read in a way that is very special for this special person.

Success must be built in. The child has learnt to expect failure. The new approach must provide success right from the start.

Work one-to-one. At this stage, the focus should be on one child and the task should be tailored for the individual. Group work can come later.

Establish a routine. Brief, frequent sessions are essential.

Show that you expect the approach to work. Ooze confidence. Express delight with each step forward.

Use the child's greatest linguistic strength — his or her own language. This is familiar territory for the non-reader, full of meaning. It's miles away from phonic charts, word lists and reading schemes. And it has the best chance of success.

A getting-started approach

1 Get the child talking about something that interests him/her. It may be a hobby or sport or favourite TV program. Ask questions. Draw out more and more information.

2 Tell the child that this is great information for a *book* and that you will make one together.

3 Tape the child's talk. Print or type it using the child's own words just as they were presented.

4 Let the child 'read' the story while listening to the tape.

5 Help in the preparation of the book. You provide the print; the child does the illustrations; together you decide on the cover.

6 Have the child 'read' the story with the tape, then gradually without. Praise every small achievement.

7 Make more books together and *continually read over the ones made previously*. Build confidence, assuring the child that this *is* reading because it is getting meaning from print.

A simple variation on the above approach is to ask the child to dictate the story to you. It is then reproduced in booklet form while he/she watches. You might find it useful to make a tape of yourself reading the story and allow the child to listen to this while reading.

A test for you

In the light of what you have read, how would you answer these questions?

I'm very worried about my John. He's only on Book 4 in reading and his cousin in the same class is on Book 7. Should I get him coached?

Paula can read and, if I make her, she will. But she just hates it. What can I do?

We've got no time for reading at home. We work hard all day and at night we like to crash in front of TV. Does this mean our babies will grow up to have reading problems? What would you suggest we do?

I was shocked the other day. I went up to see my child's teacher and there was the whole class reading library books at 10 o'clock in the morning — even the teacher! Not a reading book in sight. No wonder standards are falling! Do you think I should complain?

My child wants to borrow all these library books that are too easy for her. Do you think I should make her read books that are more challenging?

To help your child with reading...

- Have a routine of reading to him or her every day. This is one of the best ways of developing lifelong positive attitudes to reading and an understanding of print and books.
- Praise every effort in reading, especially if confidence is low. Don't compare a child's performance with that of relatives and friends.
- Be seen as a reader yourself. Take the family to the local library. Help in selecting books but resist the temptation to impose your own choices.
- Give books as presents and show your child how to care for them.
- Buy your child a bedlamp and encourage the routine of reading in bed before lights-out.
- Encourage your child to make good use of the school library. Ask: 'What have you borrowed this week? Would you like to read some of it to me? Would you like to read the whole book to me, a chapter a night?'

Writing

A very significant proportion of parents who participated in our survey requested an explanation of the method now used to teach writing (or written expression/composition).

Many adults remember writing as something that was set once a week by a teacher who decided on the topic, allowed time for completing the task and then collected the final product for marking and grading.

While there was often some follow-up of the errors that had been made in these pieces of writing, the development of competence in punctuation, grammatical usage and spelling was usually left to separate lessons. It was hoped that if the class learned and practised a particular usage, then this would carry over to the actual writing of the individual children.

Experience — supported by a great deal of research — shows this to be an unrealistic expectation. The transfer cannot be relied upon.

Writing is now seen as a *process* that involves pre-writing, drafting, revising and preparation for a reader. This process results in a product — a finished piece of writing. Today's teachers aim at helping children attain mastery of all parts of the process.

Distinguishing characteristics of the approach

1 It is based on sound knowledge of how children learn and how writing 'works', and particularly what mature writers go through as they compose meaning.

2 It requires a heavy commitment of time. Gone are the days when children would compose for one session a week. They now write, in one way or another, every day. Sometimes they will be drafting ideas or experiences, but often they will be going over a piece of writing, making changes to content or style, preparing it for people to read.

3 It has children writing at a much earlier age. Kindergarten or Prep children are encouraged to compose little statements or stories even before they can write words. Sometimes they use scribble and occasional letters to symbolise what they want to say; the teacher translates this for them, using 'grown-up' writing. This then becomes part of the material from which they learn to read. So the old distinction between reading and writing is now blurred. Children learn to read as they learn to write; and reading provides them with models of writing.

4 It requires children to learn the process of:

pre-writing or preparing (choosing a topic, thinking, researching, reading, talking, clarifying purpose...)

drafting (writing down thoughts, storylines...; in a first draft, the children may pay little attention to handwriting, spelling or points of correct usage, the *ideas* being of prime importance at this stage)

revising (going over the early draft, perhaps changing the content, modifying the style, expressing ideas differently and, finally, attending to punctuation, grammatical usage, spelling and handwriting)

publication (sometimes, at least, making the writing public, presenting it to other readers, seeking a response).

5 A teaching strategy called *conferencing* is used. This refers simply to the discussion the teacher has with the child-writer during the process. Usually the teacher will ask questions about the content so as to provoke some deeper thinking. Towards the end of the process, the teacher may use the conference to teach some point of punctuation or grammatical usage. Sometimes parents help in conferencing and in preparing children's work for publication, perhaps by typing stories or by helping the child arrange the text in booklet form.

This way of teaching writing is often called the *process-conference* approach. It is being progressively introduced into both primary and secondary schools.

The aims of teaching writing

We can confidently say that writing is now seen as a very important part of thinking and learning at school. Its value is not confined to the subject English but is increasingly recognized right across the curriculum in every grade.

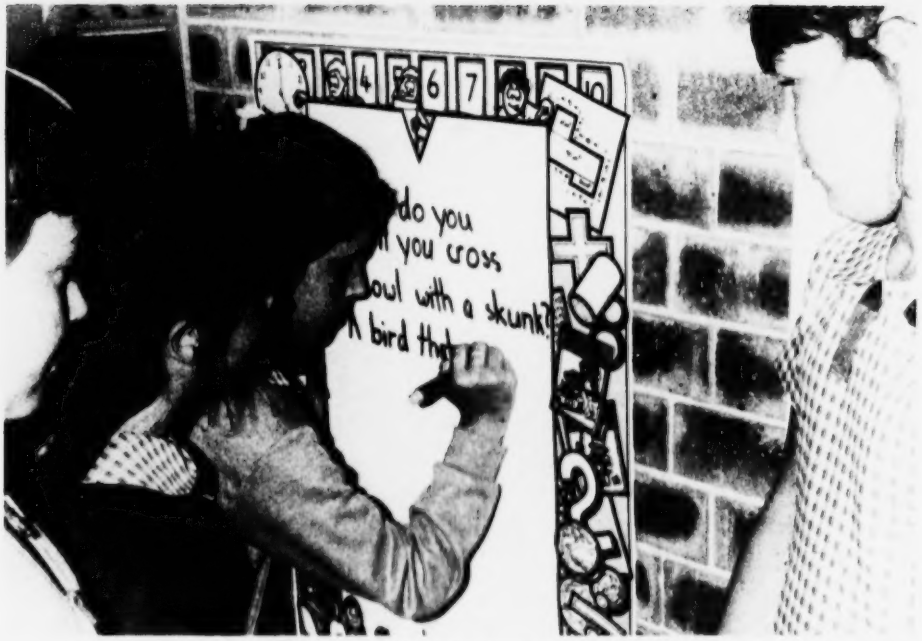
The school's writing program is designed to help children to:

- master the process of writing
- express ideas clearly
- use appropriate forms of writing
- use correct spelling, punctuation and grammar.

A good writing classroom has these features

1 Children write (that is, compose meaning) every day.

2 Children read every day and are exposed to different types of writing, including good children's literature.



The classroom graffiti board attracts young writers with a joke to share.

3 The classroom atmosphere is characterised by a sense of safety, busyness and sharing.

4 The room itself has lots of written language on display — labels, books, charts containing words, lead sentences, phrases, descriptions....

5 Children are encouraged to see themselves as writers and as members of a writing community.

6 The teacher values writing and models writing behaviour for the children.

7 The conventions of spelling, punctuation and grammatical usage are taught during the process and at the point of need.

Keeping a check on progress

Naturally, parents want to know how their children are progressing in writing.

They may occasionally come across an early draft — written untidily and with numerous spelling and usage errors. Remembering the neatly presented written expression or composition books of the past, they are tempted to think the worst of modern methods and to wonder if their child is being disadvantaged.

When such concerns arise, it is important to talk to the teacher. A common practice now is for each child to keep an individual writing folder. Collected in this are examples of early draft writing as well as polished pieces ready for publication. The folder often includes a list of stories written (this gives some idea of the quantity of writing) and a checklist of the punctuation and grammatical usage conventions that have been mastered.

Going through the child's folder with the teacher, seeing the progress that has been made and hearing the teacher's explanations, can be very reassuring.

Not all schools keep individual writing folders, but each one has some method of monitoring progress and parents should not hesitate to discuss the child's development as a writer with the teacher. What is seen and said, examples shown and the process explained, are far more useful that any collection of marks given to individual stories or scores on some standardized test.

Some expert comment on writing

Writing is the basic stuff of education. It has been sorely neglected in our schools. We have substituted the passive reception of information for the active expression of facts, ideas and feelings. We now need to right the balance between sending and receiving. We need to let them write.

Donald Graves

The writer's craft is a messy one. He or she needs to carve meaning from an excess of detail — drafting and redrafting, crossing out some words and adding others. Help children to understand that writing is not a neat, precise process.

Lucy Calkins

Children learn to write by writing.

R. D. Walshe

Much of the current talk about the basics of writing is not only confused, but even more ironic, frivolous. Capitalisation, spelling, punctuation — these are touted as the basics of writing when they represent, of course, merely the conventions, the amenities for recording the outcome of the process. The process is basic in writing....

Janet Emig

Writing isn't just a set of skills. We master the skills because we have something to write about, and someone who wants to read it. Children who have been encouraged to talk, and had their talk taken seriously; children whose first attempts

to write have been valued and replied to; those are the ones who will easily master the skills of literacy and make them their own.

Douglas Barnes

Grammar

The question of grammar concerns many of our respondents.

Some believe that grammar teaching has been abolished over recent years and they make strong pleas for its reintroduction. They suggest that if this were done, we would see an improvement in children's ability to express themselves clearly and correctly.

The term *grammar* actually refers to ways in which parts of a language are organised. When students studied formal grammar in the past, they looked in detail at the structure of sentences and learned to describe it. People of my generation remember analysing and parsing sentences, and spending hours identifying parts of speech.

While some of this may have been useful to some individuals, most people did not find that it carried over to their written compositions. This is not surprising because, since 1906, research evidence has been consistently telling us that the study of sentence structures and parts of speech does not improve students' ability to write clearly and correctly. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that when a significant amount of time is given to the study of formal grammar, *independent of the writing process*, the standard of composition actually declines.

Now, this certainly doesn't mean that the correct use of language should not be taught. Children *must* learn to use full stops, capital letters, commas, and the other items of punctuation. They must learn the conventions of correct usage so that their writing communicates with accuracy and elegance.

I suspect that a lot of people are really referring to these *conventions of usage* when they talk about the importance of the study of grammar. And they are right in seeing them as important.

How then are these conventions taught?

Generally, teachers attend to them during the writing process itself. This means that once children have completed a first draft and are working on revising and polishing it for presentation, teachers will focus attention on some point of usage; it may be a punctuation mark or it may be some fault in the structure of the sentence.

Not all children will be receiving the same sort of guidance at the same time because each has his or her particular need of the moment. However, occasionally the whole class may have a lesson on, say, the use of direct speech when it is obvious that this is a common problem for this group of young writers.

What about such terms as *nouns, verbs, adjectives* and so on? Are these taboo? Not at all. They are part of the normal vocabulary of writers. The teacher, for instance, may want to focus on the verbs the children are using; the general quality of expression will improve if these are more precise. There is no reason at all why the teacher wouldn't use the term *verb* or, if she wished, something more easily understood by the children, such as *doing word*. But the teacher wouldn't be presenting lessons on different types of verbs and all the terminology surrounding them.

In summary, then, the formal study of grammar is not pursued in today's primary school, simply because it has been shown to be ineffective in improving children's ability to write correctly. The study of correct usage is required *more than ever before*. This is done, however, not in separate lessons unrelated to the writing task, but at critical points within the writing process itself.

To help your child with writing...

- Let him or her see you write — letters, shopping lists, short messages and so on.
- Encourage the family to write — letters to friends and relatives, thank-you notes, get-well messages....
- Display writing in the home — reminders, lists of things to do, messages of congratulation, postcards from friends on holiday. Have a kitchen noticeboard or some attractive magnets on the fridge door.
- Give presents associated with writing — different types of pens and pencils, paper of different shapes and colours, a desk lamp, a diary, a dictionary, erasers....
- Be an interested listener and reader. Talk over ideas for writing, encourage the reading aloud of early drafts, read the finished product with enthusiasm.
- Praise writing done at school. Pay more attention to what your child is writing about than to the spelling and punctuation.

Spelling

Spelling remains an important part of the curriculum. The approach to teaching spelling, however, has changed over recent years.

Many parents remember a very structured program from their own school days. Each week a new list of words was presented in the textbook. These words were drilled at school and learned again at home. At the end of the week they were tested.

Under this system, you knew where you were. Good spellers got all the words right; poor spellers got a lot wrong; and those in the middle achieved results that reflected the amount of time and effort they put into the task.

Elements of this still exist but the general approach now reflects better what research has told us about how children actually learn to spell. These are some of the key research findings.

1 Memorizing lists of words printed in spelling textbooks is a very inefficient way of improving spelling. One group of researchers expresses it bluntly: 'The plain fact is that much of the time spent on spelling lessons is wasted. It would be better spent in meaningful reading and writing.'

2 Learning-to-spell and learning-to-memorize-lists are two *different* processes.

3 The main strategy used by good spellers is not rote memorization. Instead, they intuitively search out the ways in which the spelling system operates, moving from approximations (see *Invented spelling* below) to conventional use in much the same manner as they do when they are learning to talk.

4 Good spellers have many ways of learning words. Their ability and willingness to *self-correct* by reading over their own work helps them a great deal.

5 Spelling instruction is most effective when it is continuously linked to the children's writing activities.

6 Reading assists spelling.

On this last point: have you noticed that when people are unsure of how to spell a word, they will often write it down so that they can see if it 'looks right'? This is an effective strategy and underlines a very important fact: in learning to spell we rely very much on our *visual* memory. If we see a word often enough, the shape tends to stay with us.

In learning to spell, as in all other areas, children display different abilities and progress at different rates. It is very important that they don't lose confidence and come to see themselves as 'bad spellers'.

Spelling should serve writing — knowing words for their own sake has no real purpose. So the children are taught ways of improving their spelling in the context of their own writing.

It is important to note that word lists are still kept and learned, but the words are those the children actually *use*. Most of them, therefore, belong to a personal collection built up by the child-writer. The teacher will also provide words related to themes or topics being studied, along with various word families in which the child can learn to recognise pattern and consistency.

Invented spelling

Parents of children in the early grades sometimes hear the term 'invented spelling'. It's an unfortunate one because it can suggest an 'anything-goes' attitude at an important stage of learning, and therefore calls for some explanation. The term 'temporary spelling', used by Brian Cambourne and Jan Turbill, is preferable because it's less likely to be misunderstood.

From the earliest days at school, children are encouraged to put on paper any symbols that help them get a message across. The very young child might simply scribble and then explain what he or she has 'written'. Later you might get a single letter representing a whole word; still later, the word might be represented by three or four letters.

The children write their own stories using these 'inventions' and the teacher rewrites them in conventional spelling. The child-authored stories are often used as part of an individual pupil's reading material. They are supplemented with plenty of shared stories and a great deal of print on display around the classroom.

Far from allowing the children to become careless spellers and writers, this approach has a strong element of discipline. The children are gradually taught how to proofread their own work, identify and check doubtful spellings and prepare their stories for other readers. The 'inventions' are simply steps along the road to becoming a proficient speller.

A way to learn a new word

Once children have collected words in personal lists, supplemented by words *that will be used* in class writing activities, they need to learn them.

The look-cover-write-check method was devised by Ernest Horn in 1919 and has stood the test of time. Children still find it one of the most effective ways of deliberately mastering new words. It is as simple at this:

LOOK at the word and say it to yourself

COVER it; close your eyes and 'see' it
WRITE the word down
CHECK to see if you are correct — if not, repeat the steps.

Spelling rules

It is a common belief that if children were systematically taught all the rules that govern spelling, then national spelling standards would improve dramatically.

Unfortunately, many of the so-called spelling rules collapse under the weight of their many exceptions. For this reason, most authorities see little value in teaching spelling through rules.

Children are encouraged, of course, to look for patterns in words, to engage in word-building and to categorise words into 'families'. But this is quite different to having the children memorize rules in the hope that they will apply them as they write.

A good spelling classroom has these features

1 Children read extensively every day.

2 Children write every day. Spelling is attended to when they are preparing their work for a reader. Fluent handwriting, which helps spelling, is encouraged.

3 Printed and written language is displayed prominently around the room. Children consult these displays when looking for words and checking their spelling.

4 The children compile lists of words that are referred to regularly and committed to memory. Each child has a personal list comprising words that come directly out of his or her daily writing. There may also be lists of new words that relate to the current unit or theme being studied. And many classes have short lists of commonly misspelt words.

5 There are many activities — word-building, spelling games, and so on — that cultivate a real interest in words.

6 Children are encouraged to use the look-cover-write-check method in time that is set aside for the direct learning of words.

7 Children are taught and continually encouraged to use proofreading skills. The regular reminder is: 'Check the spelling of words that "don't look right" as you polish your writing.'

8 Children are encouraged to take risks in the first draft of their writing and then to check ideas, words, punctuation, usage and spelling in a later draft.

9 Children are given practice in mastering alphabetical order and encouraged to use the dictionary and thesaurus.

In summary

1 Spelling is seen as very important and is taught directly in today's primary schools.

2 Teachers are gradually abandoning graded lists of words in spelling textbooks because research and experience both show that learning such lists does not improve the accuracy of spelling in the children's own writing.

3 The textbook lists are being replaced by lists of words-in-use; that is, personal lists compiled by each child in the light of his or her current reading and writing. These may be supplemented by words related to themes or topics being treated in class.

4 Today's approach to the mastery of spelling stresses the importance of the following:

- self-confidence of the child
- reading
- basing instruction on the words used in the child's own writing
- a variety of learning-to-spell strategies: proofreading, consulting lists and dictionaries, making use of visual memory ('Does it look right?') and so on.

Some expert comment on spelling

The most important step a teacher can take is to improve the pupil's confidence in his own capacity. Repeated failure reinforces a poor self-image, and the correction of written work can make matters worse unless its purposes are carefully worked out.

Bullock Report

The school's emphasis should be on continuous (individual) growth rather than on requiring a fixed-grade achievement standard for all.

G. Hildreth

Any class of children....will have a wide range of spelling ability and attainments. Class teaching is therefore bound to be inefficient; individual and group teaching must be used.

A.E. Tansley

Confidence in spelling comes with confidence in writing, and both depend heavily upon the teacher's approach. If a pupil finds writing difficult, it is pointless to reinforce his sense of inadequacy by ruthlessly marking the spelling errors. This practice can lead also to 'safe' writing in which the child restricts his choice of words to those he can spell with certainty.

C. Cripps

Three-quarters of the classes where most progress is made are taught by rational teachers who have worked out a way for their children to correct their mistakes autonomously.

Margaret Peters

Since spelling is used only when we write, it makes sense that spelling SHOULD ALWAYS BE A WRITTEN ACTIVITY.

If, from this moment on, teachers ceased oral drill in spelling and provided only written learning experiences in spelling, I believe a dramatic improvement in spelling performance would result.

Betty Klaosen

To help your child with spelling...

- Build his or her self-confidence. Praise effort even if the result is not perfect. At all costs prevent the emergence of a self-image as a poor speller.
- Accept that teachers do not insist on correct spelling in the first draft of writing. Here the emphasis is on ideas and interesting ways of expressing them.
- Show that you care about spelling. Ask, 'Who knows how to spell...?' And advise, 'You won't feel right about the spelling of some words till you've written them down to see how they look — or made absolutely sure by looking them up in a dictionary.'
- Encourage reading. It is often argued that this is probably *the best single method of improving spelling.*
- Advise the use of the look-cover-write-check approach to committing new words to memory.

Dramatising a scene helps bring the class into the world of Playing Beattie Bow.

Drama

For many people the term 'drama' refers to the production of school plays. Drama in education is so much more than this.

Children come to school with extensive dramatic experience. Just think of all those games played with parents, brothers and sisters: the 'let's pretend' activities, the dressing-up, the imaginative play that has been a central part of their life and learning. *All of this is drama.* Through it, the children have developed their language skills and learnt about how human beings behave. Their emotions have been cultivated and their imagination stimulated.

In the classroom, this early drama is built on in a variety of ways: mime, dance drama, dramatic play, puppetry, group dramatisation....

These activities are often very closely tied to specific areas of the curriculum. The treatment of the Gold Rush in Social Studies may well include dramatisation of aspects

of life on the diggings; the discussion of a piece of literature may culminate in the dramatic presentation of a particular incident.

In this way drama becomes part of learning, creating a deeper awareness and understanding, bringing ideas together, helping individuals make personal sense of them before expressing them in front of an audience.

The modern curriculum, then, is greatly enriched by drama. Not only does it foster self-confidence, develop language and extend thinking, but it cultivates the child's emotions and imagination, and is a very powerful instrument for promoting the achievement of a variety of other educational goals.

Mathematics

Many parents across Australia are worried about their children's maths. They see this curriculum area as very important and they often feel unable to help their children because methods have changed quite dramatically from when they were at school themselves.

They remember mathematics as 'learning to do sums.' The teacher explained the method and set exercises to be completed in class and at home. These ensured that the child mastered the technique that had been demonstrated by the teacher.

This approach relied heavily on the textbook, and many a lesson began with the instruction, 'Take out your book and do the next exercise; what you don't finish, you can do for homework.'

Critics of this approach say that it bore little relation to the world of the child and in no way capitalized on what we know about how children think and solve problems.

Some children coped with this method but a great number grew up hating mathematics and feeling that wherever their own strength might lie, it was certainly not in this area.

What is mathematics?

Before considering how it is taught, we should look at what is understood as mathematics today. It is certainly a lot more than being able to add, subtract, multiply and divide.

Basically, mathematics is the study of measurement, number and space. It is very much a way of thinking that leads children to search for patterns and relationships.

Certainly calculating is part of this. So are measuring, estimating, predicting, manipulating, ordering, classifying and interpreting. All these, and others, are mathematical skills which help learners to make sense of their world.

Today's mathematics teacher tries to help the child to 'think mathematically' by beginning with real-life experiences with materials of various kinds.

This is the child's world and the only place he or she can begin to *understand* mathematical ideas.

The four processes

Children must obviously learn how to add, subtract, multiply and divide, but these four processes are not ends in themselves; they are tools that serve mathematical thinking.

Every effort is made to provoke the curiosity of children in all things mathematical. They are encouraged to investigate numbers. One and one equals two — that's basic! But, then, so does six take four, and forty-eight subtracted from fifty, and two plus zero, and so on. Teachers want their pupils to become curious about numbers and not preoccupied with a limited group of combinations arranged as a set of tables.

Concrete materials

In helping children to think mathematically, teachers use all kinds of materials — toothpicks, paddle-pop sticks, lengths of wool and string, cardboard, paper and scissors, masking tape, shells....

Using these and similar objects, children make patterns, sort and classify according to certain qualities or attributes, match lengths, group into bundles, order according to size or weight, and so on. In all of this, they develop a sense of being 'at home' with mathematical ideas.

Mastering the processes of adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing is part of this. But if it is to be truly meaningful, work with the processes must be based on understanding and not simply on imitation. Once this is attained, children need to practise these processes and so develop speed and accuracy.

Tables

Many parents express concern because children do not seem to have the quick recall of number facts that might have been more common a generation ago. This is sometimes offered as evidence that modern methods have failed and educational standards have fallen.

However, as I said earlier, mathematics is much more than committing some process or formula to memory. Children certainly do need to be able to recall basic number facts. But one must remember that this is best grounded in thorough understanding rather being merely the product of chanting or learning by heart.

In fostering this basic understanding, teachers use a variety of objects and activities. Once it has been achieved, the various number facts can be listed in tables which assist further learning and revision.

Of course, children will often have some understanding of number facts without being able to recall them quickly. Teachers, therefore, have a range of activities and games that help their pupils commit these facts to memory.

So tables are still being taught, but their arrangement and learning come after children have developed a basic understanding of what they mean, not before.

Calculators

Some parents express concern about the widespread use of calculators, which they fear might cause children to become mathematically lazy.

As I've said a couple of times already, teachers stress mathematical understanding above all else, including speed of calculation. If pupils don't understand what they are doing, getting the correct answer doesn't contribute to genuine learning.

But once a child does understand what he or she is doing, the calculator has a real place.

Teachers sometimes ask the class to solve mathematical problems and then to *check* their answers using the calculator. At other times it's used in investigating or solving problems in 'real-life' situations.

A lot of research has been done overseas comparing the mathematical performance of pupils who use calculators and those who don't. Some of the studies show that the calculator-users develop better attitudes, understanding and skill in mathematics; others have found no difference between the two groups. Such is the uncertainty that often surrounds educational research!

In summary

We can say with confidence that children are most likely to learn mathematics well when:

- they find it interesting and challenging
- they have the opportunity to manipulate materials and share their discoveries with others
- they are investigating and solving problems
- they are permitted to work at their own pace and build on previous learning

- they experience success in mathematical activities
- they can report and record their findings in language that makes sense to them
- they understand what they are doing.

To help your child with mathematics...

- Do all you can to develop his or her sense of number, size, length, weight, width, volume, area, mass/weight, and time. Find maths everywhere!
- Remember the influence you have on your child's *attitude* to mathematics. Comments such as 'No one in this family is much good at maths,' or 'Well, you're a girl and they're better at English,' set up tremendous barriers to learning.
- Involve him or her in real-life mathematics around the home — counting change, measuring, weighing, estimating, playing games that involve keeping scores, calculating journey times....
- Encourage the older child in hobbies that require 'hands-on' mathematical skills and a sense of spatial relationships — making models, assembling kits....
- Use solid objects — buttons, sticks, pieces of string and the like — when helping with mathematical problems.
- Avoid confusion by checking methods being taught at school before helping your child.

You cannot teach a man anything. You can only help him to discover it within himself.

Galileo

Social Studies

Social Studies is a particularly important part of the curriculum in which children learn about people, relationships and the environment.

It is essentially an *inquiry* subject, requiring pupils to be active investigators of questions, problems, and even conflicts.

Through this type of study, the primary school helps prepare young people for effective citizenship, which will require them to operate cooperatively, flexibly and responsibly in a changing world, and to be able to make decisions that are intelligent and sensitive to the rights, the needs and the feelings of others.

In making their inquiries, the children learn to recognize and define problems, to make observations and organise information, to draw conclusions and to develop a variety of thinking and social skills.

The actual Social Studies program is generally organised around units or themes. In each of these the pupils are led to identify and investigate key questions and problems. These will include topics drawn from Australian history and geography, and will also focus on racial, ethnic and cultural differences, on human needs and the needs of the environment.

Questions

The questions investigated are very relevant to the lives of the children.

In the early grades, for instance, they might ask:

Who am I?

How do my friends and I grow and change?

Why do we have rules?

What is my neighbourhood like?

Why do people work?

Later they might examine:

How and why do people communicate?

In what ways are families alike and different?

Who are the Australians?

Why do people live in cities?

By the end of the primary school, they might be investigating:

What do I value and why?

How do the mass media affect us?

How do societies decide what is to be done and who is to do it?

How do people use technology to change their environment?

Concepts

One of the ways in which we all make sense of our world is by developing understandings or concepts.

Social Studies programs are designed to help children develop such basic concepts as these.

- Individuals are unique but they also have needs and characteristics that are common to all people.
- A society consists of members of groups that relate to each other in many ways.
- Beliefs, principles and attitudes are important to individuals and to society.
- The customs and values of the groups within a society give that society its distinctive nature.
- Change is a continuing process in the total environment.

A good Social Studies classroom has these features

1 There is a great deal of group work as children gather and organise information, share tasks and ideas, engage in problem solving, prepare summaries of findings....

2 The children's work and other helpful and stimulating materials are displayed — maps, charts, graphs, posters....

3 There is a variety of resources which the children learn to use — reference books, pamphlets, newspapers, magazines, artifacts, games....

4 Parents and other community members are occasionally invited to act as resource people for the class — perhaps sharing information about their interests, experiences and occupations, and areas in which they have special knowledge and enthusiasm.

5 The children's inquiries will sometimes take them out of the classroom — to museums, shopping centres, libraries, parks, exhibitions, art galleries, historical sites....

What has the child learnt?

Achievement in Social Studies cannot be measured on a test. Teacher and parent observation of the individual child will provide answers to questions like these.

- What knowledge does the child have about the topics covered?
- What understandings or concepts have been developed? Does the child now have a basic understanding, for instance, that individuals have needs which they seek to satisfy in different ways, and that groups and societies interact and change?
- How effective is the child in gathering information and grasping its significance?
- What values does the child seem to be developing as a result of the program?
- Does the child seem to be able to make more informed value judgements and to act with responsibility?
- Has the child developed more positive feelings about self and others?

To help your child with Social Studies...

- Encourage natural curiosity about the world around us. What are the similarities and differences amongst groups of people? What are some of the hardships faced by people in our own society and in other countries? In what ways do we all depend on each other?
- Foster such attitudes as tolerance, cooperation, open-mindedness and compassion in discussing different social issues within the family.
- Find interesting and well-illustrated books on how different groups of people live.
- Watch and discuss suitable TV programs that examine significant social issues.
- Encourage the child to think, at his or her own level, about *why* things are the way they are and *how* we might all help to make a better world.

If a person cannot create, there is a necessary and horrible alternative, a negative answer to this need — it is the act of destruction, the unlovely outcome of an unlived life.

Eric Fromm

Science

A curriculum area which, if governments have their way, will become increasingly important in the years ahead is that of Science and Technology. The national wealth will depend, to a very significant degree, on our skills in this area.

Individual Australians will also need to feel comfortable and be able to cope constructively in a world of rapid scientific and technological change.

A well-directed study of science, from the earliest age, stimulates the child's natural curiosity and wish to inquire; it heightens skills in observing, reasoning, theory building and testing, and in distinguishing between evidence and personal opinion. All of this, of course, is close to the core of authentic education.

Problem solving

Primary school science emphasizes problem solving through enquiry and discovery.

It is not a learning area in which children sit and listen to teachers giving them information, or even one in which they rely on texts or reference books.

Rather, it calls for first-hand experiences where children observe, measure, describe and think about their natural surroundings. They are given opportunities to identify problems, pose questions, suggest possible explanations, devise ways of testing solutions and communicate what they have discovered.

Building on early learning

As with other parts of the curriculum, the study of science builds on those skills the child has developed before coming to school.

Pre-schoolers have learnt to satisfy their natural curiosity by exploring their surroundings, by observing what is happening, by comparing one thing with another, and by trying to make some sense of it all.

When they interpret something that they have experienced, we say they are *inferring*. When they organise information, putting it into some sort of order, we say they are *classifying*.

From this interpreted and categorised information, they make meaning of their world. We say that they are developing *concepts*.

The study of science develops these abilities and broadens the range of concepts. As with writing and mathematics, the focus is on the *process* of learning science, not on some pre-conceived products. Not all children will learn the same information or even study the same topics, but they should all have the opportunity to develop knowledge, concepts and skills through a whole variety of experiences.

'Science is experience in search of meaning.' Albert Einstein

Questioning

A powerful way of leading children into making scientific inquiries is to ask questions and to encourage them to do the same.

A whole series of activities can be stimulated by questions like these.

How can living things be distinguished from non-living things?

How can time be measured?

How and why do people use tools and machines?

How do living things change?

As the children pursue their problem solving, the teacher will use questioning to foster more precise observation and clearer thinking. Reflect for a moment on the mental processes quickened by questions such as these.

What might have caused this?

How long do you think this would be?

What would happen if...?

Where could this have come from?

What can we do to make...happen?

Why do you think those people...?

What has the child learnt?

As with other areas of the curriculum, achievement in science can't be adequately described by a percentage or other mark.

In evaluating individual pupils, teachers will ask themselves these sorts of questions.

- How clearly is the child thinking?
- Does he or she understand key concepts?
- Does he or she display curiosity, initiative and perseverance?
- Can he or she make accurate observations and ask appropriate questions?
- Can he or she solve problems — make predictions and test them?
- Does he or she plan with others, work cooperatively and communicate effectively?

A good science classroom has these features

1 It is a stimulating place. There may be interesting posters, charts of questions, fish tanks, plants at different stages of growth reflecting an on-going experiment....

2 One hears a wide range of questions from children as well as teacher, e.g: 'Why does this happen? What would happen if...? How can we check that...?'

3 Emphasis is on the process, not just the product of science. Therefore children are actively engaged, making investigations, recording findings, communicating conclusions.

4 Many activities have their origins in the children's own interests.

5 Children work both individually and in groups — planning, sharing observations, preparing reports....

6 The room is sometimes empty because the children are doing field-studies — in the playground, at a local park, in some nearby bushland, or on a trip to a more distant place.

To help your child with science...

- Encourage natural curiosity about how things work and why things happen. Help the child to find out rather than provide instant answers.
- Express interest in what is happening in the school's science program.
- Give presents that develop an interest in science — a simple microscope, a telescope, a science kit, a camera, models, etc.
- Give the child experience in:
  establishing and looking after a small garden
  caring for pets/maintaining an aquarium
  helping with simple cooking.
- Find interesting and well-illustrated books on science-related topics.
- Take the family to the museum, zoo, national parks, observatories, science exhibits and other places that will stimulate interest.
- Join in watching TV nature programs.

Music

Music is an essential part of every culture. It therefore has an important place in every school curriculum.

The task of teachers is to lead their pupils, firstly, to an *enjoyment* of music. They want them to find pleasure in listening to it, in making it and in being involved in various musical activities with other children.

Music itself has a very important contribution to make to the child's overall development. It helps develop the intellect as well as the emotions, and it plays an essential part in cultivating the important aesthetic sense in all of us.

Practising a piece for the school assembly.

To help your child with music...

- Remember the importance of rhymes and rhythms, songs and sounds of all kinds in playing with very young children, and in establishing a foundation for love of music.
- Encourage the use of simple instruments to 'make music' in normal play.
- Share your own favourite records and tapes; teach the children to sing the songs you enjoyed as a child.
- Play records and tapes that the children enjoy. Have a variety of old-time favourites, some light classical pieces, some pop music.
- Encourage singing at all ages — everything from nursery rhymes to some of the latest songs learned at school or from radio or TV.
- Take advantage of whatever opportunities the school offers for your children to learn an instrument. Then encourage them to practise and perform.

School music also helps in fostering many desirable human qualities — self-discipline, responsibility, sensitivity, cooperation and an appreciation of the skills and tastes of individuals from one's own and other cultures.

In the most basic sense, it is an essential part of anyone's complete education.

The program

A balanced music program has three elements:

1 *listening* in ways that develop awareness and genuine appreciation

2 *performing* through singing, playing and moving

3 *organising* sound and the making of music by the children themselves.

Through a wide range of musical experiences the children are introduced to such concepts as duration, pitch, dynamics, tone colour and structure. To the person with little background in music, a list like this may seem daunting. However, the program is developed over the full length of primary schooling, and the stress is on enjoyment through participation.

Health and Physical Education

As part of its commitment to the total development of children, the modern primary school pays special attention to health and physical education.

Health is not seen merely as the absence of disease, but as complete mental, physical and social well-being.

Skills, attitudes and values that are cultivated across the whole curriculum are very much part of the health and physical education program.

The program's main elements are health education itself, which emphasizes the various understandings, attitudes and behaviours that contribute to healthy living; physical education, where the stress is on movement; dance; and recreation and sport.

Where the health and physical education program is being given due prominence in the curriculum:

- the classroom atmosphere is happy and challenging
- children are learning to take responsibility

'I bet Mum can't do this!'
Developing coordination and skill is fun too.

- cooperation is stressed
- a wide variety of outdoor activities which develop physical skills is programmed: movement, gymnastics, dance, athletics, swimming...
- the awareness of health issues extends to the school canteen.

Daily physical education

Some years ago the South Australian Education Department developed and published a daily physical education program. The aim was to foster children's fitness and physical enthusiasm through daily vigorous activity and skill development.

Many schools throughout Australia are now using this excellent program, which has two components: *fitness*, and *skill development* in dance, gymnastics, games, water safety, swimming and aquatics.

To help your child with health and physical education...

- Give the regular praise, encouragement, approval and challenge that promote self-esteem and a sense of personal well-being.
- Help him or her to understand the importance of a healthy diet and the dangers of foods with high sugar, salt and fat content.
- Encourage participation in games and outdoor activities.
- Recognize the importance of informal play, by means of which all children use language, movement and imagination in getting to know more about themselves, other people and the world around them.
- Maintain safety standards, particularly for bike and skateboard riding.
- Ensure 'a good night's sleep' — at least 10 hours for young children, and 9 or 8 as they get older.
- Realize the importance of your own lifestyle being healthy and health-giving, since you are a very important model for your child.

Art/Craft

All children are naturally creative. They seek to express themselves by what they make, whether it's a mud pie or a masterpiece.

If schools are responsible for fostering the full growth of each of their pupils, then they must give some prominence to art and craft in their curriculum.

It is amazing how many important skills are developed in a good creative arts program. Children learn to perceive more thoughtfully, to manipulate a variety of materials, to organise themselves, to make judgements, and to respond with feeling and imagination.

In an atmosphere that encourages them to try new things, and to express their thoughts and feelings in a symbolic way, children grow as human beings, discovering truths about their world and themselves.

In such a program children learn the techniques of composition, design and construction in artwork, and engage in such activities as weaving, sewing, clay-modelling, block-cutting and wood-carving.

Today, we find creative and artistic activities in every part of the curriculum. Construction of various shapes out of heavy paper or cardboard is found in mathematics. Paintings, drawings, models, and displays of different kinds are often expressions of what has been learnt in science or Social Studies. And children will often express, through their paintings, the experiences they have had on an excursion, or their responses to the study of a poem or story.

To help your child with art/craft

- Encourage him or her to be more observant of the natural world — colours, patterns, sounds....
- Provide basic materials for creative play — paper, pencils, paints, brushes, glue, cardboard, wool, string, drawing pins, foil, pieces of wood....
- Express interest in your child's 'creations' — drawings, paintings, models.
- Share your own skills of painting, sewing, wood-working, etc. There is a tremendous feeling of satisfaction in teaching one of your own skills to your own child.
- Have some occasions when the whole family makes something (e.g. Christmas decorations).

The Basics

So many parents today are worried about any neglect of what is popularly termed 'the basics'. Respondents to the PETA survey share this concern.

My own interpretation of this is not that parents want teachers to reintroduce old-fashioned methods or to recreate schooling as it was generations ago. Rather, they want to be sure that certain things are given appropriate emphasis at school. They are saying that children should be taught:

- to read fluently
- to write clearly, using correct usage, punctuation and spelling
- to use legible handwriting
- to speak courteously and grammatically
- to be able to do the kind of arithmetic calculations that are needed in daily life
- to have some basic information about the country in which they live.

What could be more reasonable? I cannot imagine any teacher or other professional educator who would not share these objectives.

The question is: how are they best achieved? In this book I have given a broad outline of the approaches being taken in today's primary schools. Despite what critics may say, these approaches are working better than any used in the past. However, they are not perfect and there is no doubt that, as time passes, skilled researchers and creative teachers will offer better methods of achieving the desired ends.

There is much that we still do not know about learning and growth. But we do know for certain that children are most likely to succeed when their parents have confidence in them, when they have confidence in themselves, and when both parents and children have confidence in the school. When teachers and parents work as a team, supporting each other and building on each other's contributions, the children are the ones who benefit.

But let's return for a moment to our list of the basics. There is one major problem with it: *it is totally inadequate!* In these closing years of the twentieth century, the community should expect much more of its schools.

Society and its schools owe to every child at least these 'basics' which go beyond any narrowly defined 3Rs:

- *communicating* effectively both in speech and writing
- *investigating* and solving a wide range of problems
- *reasoning* logically, and avoiding common fallacies
- *thinking* critically about news, opinion and media (especially TV)

- *understanding* something of our own and other cultures
- *cooperating* with others in work and social life
- *applying* information about health in everyday life
- *expressing* oneself through the arts and crafts
- *learning* constantly and adapting to continual change
- *valuing* those qualities which make a civilized and compassionate community.

The organising of school programs which provide for all these 'basics' is one of the great challenges facing our teachers. And, as I've said, teachers cannot meet this challenge effectively without the active partnership of parents.

Education for the future

In 1988 researchers at the University of Melbourne prepared a report called *Skilling the Australian Community* for the Australian Teachers' Federation and the Commission for the Future.

Their study was based on interviews with business representatives, parents, the general public, people involved in higher and adult education, and students.

According to the groups interviewed, desirable attributes of people entering the workforce of the future include:

- numerical, oral and written proficiency
- tolerance
- confidence
- creativity
- curiosity
- technological literacy
- positive attitudes towards work.

The Old and the New

Many parents ask for a basic summary of the differences that exist between what might be called Traditional and Modern schooling.

It is hard to respond to this without resorting to stereotyping or oversimplifying. However, the two columns overleaf offer some 'feel' for the difference.

TRADITIONAL (as experienced by many parents and grandparents)	MODERN (as experienced by most of today's primary school children)
Curriculum	
• Set by external agency ('the Department')	• Guidelines provided but schools adapt in response to local characteristics and needs
• Teachers made aware precisely what to do	• Freedom for individual teachers to be flexible and develop programs to meet children's requirements
• Same program for every child	• Basically the same program but provision made for individual differences amongst children progressing at different rates; some opportunity for children to pursue interests and develop different skills
• Australia seen as mono-cultural	• Australia seen as multi-cultural
Resources	
• Chalk and talk	• Children's own experiences
• Textbooks	• Variety of books and kits
	• Materials created by children
	• Community used widely: adults come into classroom; pupils visit and use community resources
	• School library serves classrooms
Method	
• Emphasis on formal instruction	• Emphasis on informal learning, but with some formal requirements
• Teacher-centred	• Pupil-centred but with teacher acting as coordinator, stimulator, model

- Whole-class movement through set tasks
- Emphasis on learning by drill and practice

- Some whole-class work, but much individual and group work
- Emphasis on learning through activity, enquiry, problem solving, self-expression

Discipline

- Strict (but often kindly)
- Some corporal punishment
- Emphasis on obedience and conformity

- More relaxed
- Non-violent; many ways of encouraging and challenging pupils
- Need for control and respect is recognized but emphasis placed on self-discipline

Relationships

- Rather formal teacher/pupil relationship
- Parents not involved in classroom
- Tendency for teacher to work alone

- Teachers more relaxed with children
- Some parents involved in classroom
- Teachers tend to work as members of team; joint planning

Evaluation

- Emphasis on regular tests and term examinations
- Learning outcomes reported by use of marks and percentages
- Places in class often given

- Emphasis on teacher-observation of processes, checklists, samples of work...
- Learning outcomes reported verbally and by written comments
- Child's success seen in terms of individual progress, not in relation to achievement of other children

How well is my child going at school?

Parents' own observations of their child are extremely valuable pieces of data that help answer this question.

The checklist below will help you to reflect on your child. You might then discuss your observations with the teacher.

After due consideration is given to age, the following statements are true.

My child...	USUALLY	SOMETIMES	RARELY	NEVER
seems confident and enthusiastic about school work.				
appears to enjoy learning.				
works through tasks in a logical way.				
uses language well — talks, listens, reads and writes effectively and with pleasure.				
shows freshness and originality in thinking.				
makes sensible decisions.				
is considerate towards others.				
can work independently.				
uses time efficiently (i.e. doesn't take an hour to do a 15-minute job).				
can handle conflict constructively.				
accepts consequences of own actions.				
can set goals, plan and follow through.				

Discipline

Many parents who responded to our survey requested some explanation of current approaches to school discipline.

Every teacher knows the importance of classroom management. If children disrupt the class with loud talking, if they are rude and inconsiderate of others and disobedient to the teachers, worthwhile learning will not occur.

Teachers use a variety of management skills to curb such behaviour. But classroom discipline goes much further. When the overall climate is friendly, but unashamedly firm whenever necessary, when expectations are clear and routines are established and when the learning tasks are interesting and within the ability of the children, disruptive behaviour is far less likely to occur.

Sometimes, of course, children will bring emotional problems and frustrations from home to school. Such individuals need special help and it is often hard for a teacher to provide this when trying to teach a class.

Self-discipline

When a school considers its approach to discipline, it does not confine itself to the management of children or to the help needed by those who have special problems. The aim of every school is to help individual children grow in self-discipline.

This doesn't come automatically. Over the years, children must learn to control their impulses and emotions, to work towards objectives, to respect themselves and others, and in general to take responsibility for their own actions.

In their effort to assist this growth, teachers often use techniques such as these.

- They will have class discussions on the *reasons* why people have problems getting along together and they will talk about how groups create rules to govern behaviour.
- They will negotiate class rules with the children, enforce them and regularly evaluate their appropriateness.
- They will encourage the children to participate in other decision making, ensuring that they consider the possible consequences of decisions they make and the responsibilities that come with the power to make decisions.
- They will maintain a sense of predictability in classroom life. Actions have consequences. Behaviour that hurts others or disrupts learning is not tolerated; productive behaviour is praised and encouraged.

One school's policy

The Discipline Policy of one particular school begins with the following statement. I have published it here because I think it catches the spirit of something that all modern schools are trying to achieve.

BELIEF STATEMENT

1 We believe that discipline means guiding the child towards self-control and self-direction. It can never be reduced to the mere enforcement of a set of rules.

2 We see our task not merely as curbing misbehaviour but as promoting constructive and positive behaviour.

3 We believe that all human beings — including teachers — have the right to be treated with respect and courtesy.

4 We see the development of a healthy self-concept in children as a major pre-requisite for sound discipline.

5 We accept that a well-planned curriculum is a foundation for good classroom discipline.

6 We believe that constructive discipline grows out of a warm pupil-teacher relationship.

7 We accept responsibility, along with home and community, for helping our children develop socially acceptable behaviour.

Education in values

Any treatment of discipline would be incomplete if not placed in the context of education in values.

Schools and homes, by their very nature, are value-laden institutions. They teach values to impressionable youngsters in everything they do, especially in the structures and routines they maintain, in the qualities and achievements they commend and celebrate, in the example offered by the adults and in the sorts of relationships that exist between the various members, young and old.

Responsible homes and schools share the hope that children will come to value learning and the search for truth, that they will recognize and value their own worth and the worth of others, and that they will hold and esteem the virtues of honesty, cooperation, peace, tolerance, justice and compassion.

It is this commitment to values that gives some direction and purpose to any discussion of discipline which looks to the development of individuals and goes beyond a preoccupation with management of groups and with organisational convenience.

Homework

The massive nomination of 'homework' as an item to be treated in this book should not surprise anyone who has close contact with parents. What parents do not have some unanswered questions about homework?

Some are worried because their children don't seem to do enough; others, because they do too much. And most would like to be able to help more effectively.

More than a few parents told distressing stories of tearful children and harassed Mums and Dads who didn't know the right terms to use or whose methods of calculating were different from the ones used in school today.

Homework — good or bad?

In itself, homework is not necessarily a good thing. In fact, it does more harm than good when:

- it is merely a dull, time-consuming routine that kills interest and enthusiasm
- it is a source of tension and conflict in the family, lowering parental confidence in the child and the school and lessening the child's self-esteem
- it leaves the child feeling inadequate and tired
- it absorbs time that should be devoted to the family and recreational activity.

When any one of these conditions apply, homework is anti-educational and it would be better if there were no homework set at all.

On the other hand, homework that has been sensibly devised with sound educational principles in mind can assist children's learning. It is useful when:

- it gives children the chance to consolidate what they have learnt at school
- it allows for the fact that children learn and work at different rates and have different needs
- it increases children's confidence and enjoyment in learning
- it gives parents opportunities to encourage, express approval and, in general, relate positively to their children
- it develops productive long-term habits of learning and planning.

Some practical hints

So where does that leave parents who find a mixture of all of the above criteria — both good and bad — in the homework experience of their children? You might try these suggestions.

1 Know the school's homework policy and the reasons behind it. In some schools, for instance, the teachers do not set special homework tasks but expect the children to spend some time each evening in reading, finishing work and following up lines of enquiry that have developed at school.

2 Make homework time as pleasant as you can. Provide an attractive work area where there is a desk or table and adequate lighting. Ensure that it is quiet.

3 Try to establish a predictable routine. If homework is done at the same time each evening, no great decisions about starting have to be made.

4 Encourage the children to work reasonably quickly and efficiently. Have a set time limit and don't let them work beyond that. Certainly there is little point in their slogging on once they are frustrated and tired.

5 If you are actively helping with a particular task, keep your explanation as simple and practical as you can. Demonstrate, encourage and, where possible, express approval and satisfaction. If you find yourself becoming upset and the atmosphere getting tense, stop helping.

How much time?

Many parents have asked what time span is appropriate for homework in the different grades, but it's hard to answer with confidence because conditions vary greatly

from one part of Australia to another, and schools have developed their own policies to fit in with local conditions.

None the less I think it fair to say that, generally, very little formal homework is given in the first three years of school. Parents, however, are encouraged to read to their children and share other activities. The children might gather information for use in school the next day, or make simple entries in a diary, or keep scrapbooks. But all of this is very low-key.

For older children, many schools regularly set specific tasks that might take up to thirty minutes in Years 3 and 4, and up to an hour in the upper primary years. This varies from school to school, with many teachers preferring the children to spend their home time in a more relaxed fashion — reading, pursuing hobbies, playing imaginative games, and so on.

We must remember, too, that what takes one child thirty minutes to do will take another three or four times as long. Many complaints about excessive homework end up revealing the particular child's inability to use time efficiently. This is where set time limits and routines can be particularly useful.

The best homework

The most useful homework of all has little to do with textbooks and exercises but it can be guaranteed to help children become better learners and happier human beings. This is some of the *home* work that really makes a difference:

- lots and lots of family conversation — story-telling, jokes, discussions about everything under the sun
- shared bed-time stories with Mum or Dad reading to the children
- private reading in bed before lights-out
- family games, activities and hobbies
- regular visits to the local library
- outings to all kinds of places of social, historic or natural interest
- the kind of imaginative play that comes naturally to children of all ages.

> *The person who really thinks, learns as much from his failures as from his successes.*
>
> John Dewey

Television

Parents do not have to be reminded of the importance of TV in the lives of children. They realize that the box in the corner is a very effective teacher. Not only does it provide an incredible amount of information about the world but it also educates in attitudes and values.

The average Australian child spends as much time over a year in watching television as he or she spends in the classroom. In fact, on leaving school, the typical student will have spent about 12,000 hours in front of teachers and at least 15,000 hours in front of television sets. And every moment of viewing has taught something — for good or ill!

This is one reason why education systems, both government and non-government, are urging schools to assist their pupils to become critical, well-informed individuals able to use television intelligently. Often this is part of what is called 'media education'.

What effect does TV have on children?

There is no simple answer to this question. Good TV programs — and there are many of them — stimulate children's interest in the wider world, deepen their understanding of people, and give viewers the opportunity to relax.

On the negative side, television can encourage children to be passive — particularly when they view for long hours. More subtly, it can coax them away from such essential activities as conversation, play, hobbies, reading and study. It can also teach 'values' that both parents and teachers find quite unacceptable.

Research tells us that the children *least* affected negatively by TV viewing are those:

who find life interesting and who get on well with others
who enjoy school and games
who feel wanted and loved, and
who don't watch for excessively long periods.

So it seems that the best way to help our children is to see that they have a *varied* life which extends to *many activities* and so keeps passive TV viewing in proportion as but one element in a balanced, satisfying childhood.

Talking about TV

One of the most effective ways of helping children to think critically about television is to talk with them about what they watch.

I am not suggesting that we make fun of their preferred shows or spoil their enjoyment by being coldly analytical about everything. But talking does help people to develop some perspective on what they watch, and even to get more enjoyment from their favourite programs.

With smaller children, we might simply talk about the storyline: 'Did you like the part when...? What did you think was the funniest part?' And the characters: 'Which person do you like best in that show?'

Older children are able to respond to questions requiring some deeper thinking: 'What seemed to be the most important things in life for the people in this particular show? Do members of our family think the same way?' (In other words, how do *their* values compare with *ours?*)

Or, 'Who are the good people in this show? What do they do that makes us say that?'

Or, more generally, 'How do characters handle disagreements and conflicts in different shows? By physical violence? By quarrelling? By discussion? What are the ways in which we try to solve the problems we have with people?'

TV advertisements

Someone once remarked that TV brings us two kinds of news: *bad news* through the evening news bulletins, *good news* through the never-ending ads.

But when we look carefully at television advertisements, we often find that they are not offering much good news at all!

Just think for a moment about those fast-moving, happy, colourful ads — your child will have watched 350,000 of them by age 18! In their own way they are very 'educational'. They are training young people to become uncritical and preferably compulsive consumers; they are educating towards a spending lifestyle.

All the more reason for teachers and parents to discuss the advertisements and subject them to some sort of critical review. What is being sold? What persuasive techniques are employed? What human needs or drives or values are being appealed to? How is 'the good life' being defined?

Seven propositions

Television can become such an significant influence in the lives of children that it is vital for families to have well-thought-out policies on its use.

One way of developing a family policy is to discuss some basic assertions, accept or reject them, and use the discussion to reach some basic agreement that will govern TV viewing in the home.

Overleaf are seven propositions that you might like to discuss with your family to help decide your own policy.

1 Every home needs sensible rules that prevent squabbling over which program shall be watched.

2 The basic rule should require that viewing be limited and *selective*, not continuous and aimless. Every member of the family should be allowed to share in the weekly selection.

3 Parents should know what their children are watching and have the moral courage to decide on its suitability; they should remember the knob on the TV which says OFF and be prepared to use it.

4 Parents should from time to time watch some of their children's favourites with them and talk about them.

5 There needs to be an occasional review of the amount of time the set is switched off. Is there enough time for other activities (reading, study, exercise, conversation, play, etc.)?

6 There should be no TV at meal times, as this is the family's time for talk.

7 No matter what routine is decided on, there should be room for flexibility. The policy itself should not be allowed to cause disharmony.

Excursions

Most parents appreciate the place of the occasional excursion in the school's curriculum. None the less some fear that time out of the classroom is really wasted and think that children would be better served if the normal classroom routines were left unbroken. Outings, they feel, are basically recreational and should be left to weekends and to the discretion of individual families.

However, the usefulness of excursions becomes more obvious when one considers how children learn, and reads through the descriptions provided in this book of what actually happens in the different curriculum areas.

Fieldwork

Excursions are not just picnics or pleasant outings. They are the fieldwork that stimulates, supports and often crowns the learning that takes place in the classroom.

They give children *first-hand experience* of some of the things they are studying. A visit to an historical site or a national park, for instance, gives a special reality to events, ways of living and forms of life that can only be *talked about* back at school.

The excursion gives children the chance to see for themselves, to test ideas, to gather information, to develop skills and to grow in that special awareness and enthusiasm that results from *being there.*

Back in the classroom, the experience is worked over and made sense of. The children discuss what has happened and tie it in with previous learning. By re-creating the event in writing, by painting, dramatizing, displaying photographs and other forms of expression, they develop a deeper understanding, as well as sharpening the skills that are basic to such activities.

Developing relationships

There is another aspect of the excursion that should not be overlooked. It can make a major contribution to the development of social skills.

The children learn to cope with variations to the normal school routine. Here is a new situation which requires cooperation, sensitivity to the needs of others and obedience to the various regulations that govern safety. People are required to act responsibly and to use common sense in adapting to the demands of an unfamiliar environment.

Often teachers will invite parents to accompany the class on an excursion. This provides the children with a range of caring adults who can supervise, explain and help ensure that everyone benefits from the opportunities available. The parents find that it gives them a chance to see children engaging in school-type learning; it gives them special insights into the curriculum and its aims.

Could do better!

'This child can do much better!' What could be more frustrating to a parent than this comment? You see it on the report form, or the teacher says it at an interview, and you feel like ringing 'a certain party's' nine-year-old neck!

It seems such a waste. You know the satisfaction and joy that comes from doing well but here is someone who just can't be bothered. An under-achiever!

This sense of frustration is shared by many parents, and quite a few referred to it specifically in their responses to the PETA survey.

Let's look at the possible reasons why some primary children simply don't try, because these might give clues to some remedies. There are at least five basic reasons.

1 They may have had such unpleasant learning experiences in the past that their self-confidence has been badly damaged. A challenge means a risk of failure. They have learnt that failure is very painful and so they defend themselves from it by avoiding any challenges that might stretch them.

2 They may have some special difficulties in learning that are not obvious to the teacher. So, for instance, a child of normal intelligence might have some perceptual problem that makes reading difficult; this affects nearly all learning areas. However, a natural ability to think and communicate masks the problem.

3 The expectations of parents may be too high. No matter what you do, it's never enough. 'Nine out of ten? How come you lost a mark?' One way of defending yourself from unrealistic expectations is to stop playing the game, because no matter how hard you try, you'll never be allowed much satisfaction.

4 The expectations of parents may be too low. Because people don't expect much, they don't get it. Children tend to live down to as well as up to parental expectations.

5 The learner may be so impulsive, so locked into seeking immediate gratification, into following up what interests him or her right at this very moment, that there is no scope for planning or for seeing things through. Lack of self-discipline, lack of organisational skills, being easily distracted — all combine to produce a mediocre performance.

What can be done to help?

The answer depends very much on the reason why the child is under-achieving. The various suggestions about helping children already made in this book are perhaps even more relevant to the under-achiever, and here are some specific hints.

- If the child lacks confidence, work on reinforcing successful experiences. Praise every little achievement, be interested and supportive, get across to the child the message that 'I can do it! Things are beginning to come good for me at last!'
- Have *realistic* expectations. Kindly but firmly let the child know that from now on things will be different. Monitor progress by keeping in contact with the teacher. Encourage, reward — but also demand effort and commitment.
- Provide the child with advice on how to plan and organise. Establish routines and timetables that give some structure; help set specific short-term goals. Recognize and praise every achievement.

State-wide Testing

In recent years we have seen various political groups calling for regular testing of so-called basic skills of pupils at different levels of schooling.

If this were done across a particular state or the nation as a whole, it is argued, areas of weakness would be identified, schools would be more accountable and, ultimately, standards would rise. At the time of writing, the governments of New South Wales, Queensland, Tasmania and the Northern Territory have reached agreement on policies of basic skills testing.

Teachers, generally, are very concerned about this trend, which they see as threatening the strong *person-centred* education that has progressively become the focus of primary schooling over the last fifteen years or so.

They are aware that trends in the world economy and trade have led governments to insist that schools should serve national economic needs more directly. This way of seeing schooling stresses value for money and draws heavily on the concepts of market forces.

It is very much in evidence in the USA, where the focus of education has become the skills and competencies that can be measured. In many places the information provided by centrally-produced tests is seen by policy-makers as giving the most meaningful indicators of school quality, teacher competence and student achievement.

However, educators around the world have issued urgent warnings about the distorting capabilities of an emphasis on standardized testing. In 1984, for instance, the prestigious National Council for the Teaching of English formally urged American educators 'to speak out against the growing reliance on standardized test data.' Two years earlier the influential Cockcroft Committee, established by the British Government to inquire into the teaching of mathematics, had reminded teachers that 'testing does not of itself lead to learning or to the raising of standards.'

What are the objections to state-wide tests?

Australian teachers and administrators, by and large, oppose large-scale testing programs. Their reasons are these.

1 Tests which can measure what literacy and numeracy are all about simply do not exist. These are not skills that can be measured precisely. The term literacy, for instance, describes a wide range of behaviours, attitudes and skills; it cannot be reduced to some unit of measurement.

2 The overseas experience is that such testing distorts the curriculum, skewing it away from higher-level thinking activities towards a narrow range of skills and

knowledge likely to be measured. There is almost irresistible pressure on teachers to 'teach to the test' rather than the child.

3 The focus on multiple-choice items, which is a feature of such tests, ignores the significant aspects of the curriculum and trivializes knowledge and learning.

4 Undesirable pressure can be placed on students (some as young as eight) by the tests. 'Poor' results can damage both the self-confidence of the child and the reputation of the school and its teachers.

5 Certain groups (e.g. those from non-English-speaking backgrounds) are likely to be disadvantaged because of the very nature of the tests.

6 There is considerable likelihood that, given the above objections, widespread testing could result in inappropriate decisions, based on scores, about class placement, promotion, grouping and curriculum planning.

A useful alternative

The political reality is that schools will be faced with increasing pressure to demonstrate that standards are being maintained and, in fact, improved.

An alternative to mass testing is being developed by the Curriculum Development Centre in Canberra. This involves the collection of a range of examples of children's work, accompanied by teacher commentaries, indicating what is expected of children and what they have achieved at the various levels of schooling.

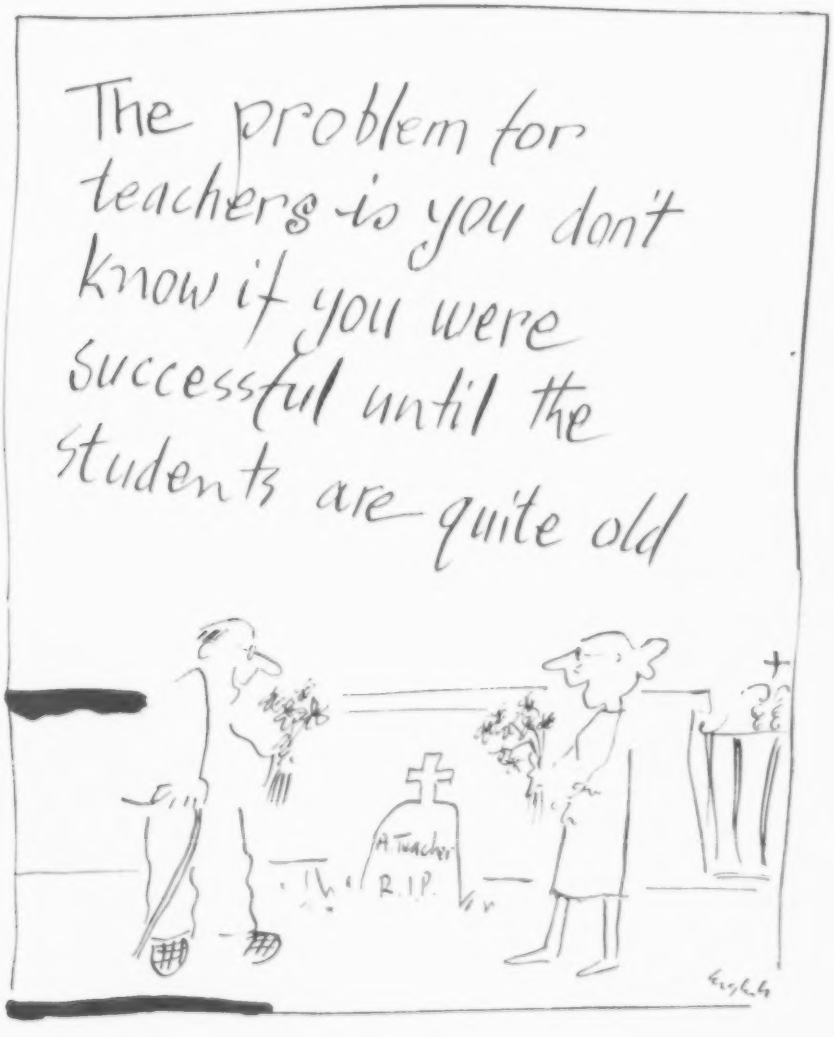
It will clarify the kinds of performances which need to be reached progressively if children are to succeed academically. There is no question of a pass/fail standard, but schools will have a reference of standards or levels against which progress can be gauged.

A national curriculum

Quite a few parents, particularly from the ACT, ask why the primary curriculum varies from state to state. They point out that a common curriculum with agreed-upon content and standards would reduce disruption when families move across state and territory boundaries.

Such a development would not be easy, of course. The various states and territories have their own education systems. And about twenty per cent of the nation's primary age children attend non-government schools, which have their own aims and purposes and their own approaches to the development of their curricula.

There is also a strong case to be made for giving school communities the freedom to develop programs and provide learning experiences that serve the needs of their particular children and take special account of the local situation.



Nevertheless, there is growing acceptance of the desirability of having greater cooperation and coordination across Australian schools. A Commonwealth agency, the Curriculum Development Council, has the task of fostering the collaboration of the different education authorities.

Despite the obvious advantages of a more standardized curriculum, educators would stress the importance of teachers having freedom to adapt what they teach to the needs of individual children, to develop new and better approaches, and to foster in children those various personal qualities which can easily be overlooked when planning moves away from the local community.

Grade Standards

One of the most frequent requests in the PETA survey was for the publication of standards of achievement that should be reached by the end of each grade.

A great number of parents believe, quite understandably, that if they had a description of what a child should be able to do in, say, mathematics or reading at the end of four years at school, then they would be in a better position to monitor their child's progress.

It seems an eminently sensible request, yet it is one that is impossible to satisfy.

For a start, there are no nation-wide syllabuses that lay down *precisely* what should be taught in each grade. Nor are such documents produced by state governments or by non-government systems.

One reason for this is that there is no such thing as a particular grade standard. Primary schooling is seen as a single entity that stretches over seven years. Within any one of those years there will be children whose abilities and levels of achievement range widely; this is accepted as normal and programs are devised accordingly.

The task of the teacher is to focus on the individual and to assist that child to progress with confidence at his or her own rate. Whether the child is in Year 3 or Year 5 really makes no difference; the only standard that can be applied is whether or not he or she is progressing at an appropriate pace.

If lists of precise objectives were drawn up, they would tend to distort the curriculum. One would expect them to include what is easily observable and measurable and to ignore more fundamental aspects of learning.

How, for instance, could a list of precise attainments at grade level deal with the development of concepts and processes? How could it offer grade specifications in the areas of imaginative thinking, creative self-expression, decision making and problem solving, all of which are at the heart of the primary curriculum?

A local response

The best resource for giving parents a sense of how their own child is progressing, both as an individual and in relation to children generally, is the local school.

Meetings can be held at which parents are taken through different aspects of the curriculum, and told and shown examples of what children are achieving in different grades.

Schools often find it useful to invite someone with knowledge of a range of schools — an inspector, consultant or adviser — to describe the general learning patterns of children in terms that give parents an overall picture of Australian children.

The important thing to remember is that schooling is not a race or contest. Its purpose is to help children to grow in so many ways. But they must develop at their own pace and in their own manner; their success is personal and doesn't depend on reading earlier, calculating faster or writing more neatly than other people who are also growing up.

Of course the best way for parents to get a profile of the child as a learner is to talk with the class teacher. These conversations between partners, together with the parents' own observation of the child's habits and achievements, provide the most useful and valid information.

The Myth of Decline

The Australian mass media have been telling the public for as long as anyone can remember that educational standards are declining.

Radio talk-back commentators are sure of this, and they remind their listeners regularly. Newspaper columnists and editorial writers reinforce the view. The occasional academic, usually a professor of a subject that has no connection with children's learning, will confirm the downward trend. Employers, too, insist that apprentices can't add up, typists can't spell and applicants for jobs can't fill in the right form. Politicians find it useful to kick the can of decline about election time.

It's all very depressing — especially for the teachers, who sometimes get the impression that they are seen as part of a great conspiracy to undermine the nation's welfare.

A golden age?

Well, what's the truth? Are things as bad as the critics of our schools make out?

I suppose if you're going to talk about decline, you really have to identify some point in history where standards began to fall. You have to find some earlier golden age.

Now we all like to think that at the time when we went to school, things were special ('Why, if we'd tried to get away with some of the rubbish that comes home from school these days!...')

But if we go back one or two or three generations and consult the newspapers of the day, reports of employer organisations and comments of public examiners, we find exactly the same sense of pessimism.

For instance, reviewing the comments of NSW public examiners from the 1910s to the 1960s for their book *English Teaching from A to Z*, Ken Watson and Wayne

Sawyer found annual denunciations of the students' dreadful inability to cope with grammar, punctuation and spelling.

The poor examiner who angrily penned 'Deplorable English — ungrammatical stuff!' in his 1919 report was echoed in this comment forty-two years later: 'Spelling and grammar are lost arts!'

Now, in case you think that's all you can expect from New South Wales, let me refer to Dr Stan Doenau's review of South Australian examiners' comments in *Have School Standards Declined?*

In 1934 the examiners sadly noted 'the same weakness of style as in previous examinations.' By 1947 'the proportion of papers marred by great inaccuracies of expression' had increased. Again, in 1955, 'most of the weaknesses listed in these reports since 1945 have recurred in great numbers'; by 1962 'the number of howlers appears to be increasing year by year.' And in 1967, as in NSW, 'full stops and commas are rarely used'!

Back to basics?

What does it all mean? Well, for a start, it means that we will look in vain for some golden age when teachers possessed skills and methods that we lack and should do our best to rediscover. If going back to basics means going back to outmoded methods, then national standards will certainly be at risk.

But what about empirical research evidence? Is there any of this?

There most certainly is. And whenever serious research is done, the results always disprove the decline theory.

However, we must acknowledge that the failure of any child to master fundamental skills of reading, writing and calculating is no longer acceptable; the consequences are far too serious. In general, Australian schools are doing a good job, but they can and must do even better.

Their major problems are more the legacies of an exam-oriented and authoritarian past than of the more innovative and humane practices that are now making an appreciable impact on the educational scene.

The community owes it to the schools to judge them on their performance and not be swayed by ill-informed statements from journalists and others who have not bothered to do their homework.

Another parent survey

During 1986-87 the South Australian Education Department conducted a major review of education in that state. As part of this review, parental opinion was tapped in a variety of ways.

Parents were generally satisfied with their local school. However, there were certain things they expected their children to achieve.

- Good knowledge and understanding of the basic subjects of reading, writing and mathematics.
- Communication skills — accurate spelling, clear and confident speech, imaginative and correct written language and good listening skills.
- Instant recall of multiplication tables, competency in multiplication, division, addition and subtraction, and understanding of the metric system.
- Positive self-esteem.
- Good social skills.
- Successful transition from primary to secondary school.

How do you react to this list? Would you personally wish to change it in any way?

Questions often asked

A lot of parents made use of the PETA survey to ask specific questions. I have tried to respond by identifying individual questions that catch the general spirit of many others.

Social skills

My daughter has great difficulty making friends; she just seems to lack the social skills. The situation worsens when others 'pick on' her in the way children often do with loners. How can I help her?

Quite a number of children suffer in this way. The problem is not just a social one either. Rejection by other children can result in low self-esteem and general unhappiness which affect learning.

This is something you should discuss with the teacher. Between you, it may be possible to identify the causes and agree on some joint course of action.

Perhaps your daughter is somewhat immature and has not mastered the social skills of children of her age — for instance, giving compliments, suggesting interesting things to do, telling funny anecdotes, taking turns ....

You may be able to discuss this with the child herself. How does she see her own behaviour? What does she do to get other children's attention? What do they say to her when they are being critical? Does she tease people or — most important for some age groups — tell tales? You might observe her when she is with others in an effort to see what is going wrong. It would be relevant to compare her age with the average in the class. She may be significantly younger and perhaps her 'natural' group is in a lower grade. Repetition is one possibility.

You might be able to structure some situations in which the little girl has a chance of developing closer friendships — inviting one or two children to 'sleep over' one weekend, taking a very small group on an enjoyable outing....

Above all else, do everything you can to raise the child's level of self-confidence. Social success requires people to take certain risks in what they say and do. Confident people are willing to take these risks.

Tests

What's happened to the regular school tests? When my older children were in primary, their work was tested regularly and the marks were sent home. All we get for our youngest is the occasional warm and fuzzy report with no marks at all.

There is certainly a lot less testing going on these days in the first seven years of school. Teachers are relying much more heavily on their professional observations of the individual child's progress. They try to understand the strengths and weaknesses of particular pupils and use this information to plan future learning opportunities. All of this is best reported to parents in a face-to-face interview where both educational partners can discuss how the individual child can be helped.

The old emphasis on tests with marks and percentages tended to trivialize learning and distort the teaching program. Most tests of that kind didn't really measure what they were supposed to anyway. After all, what could seventy per cent in reading possibly mean? Also, the testing ritual resulted in most unfortunate comparisons that turned primary schooling into a race in which one child's success depended on whether or not he or she did better than another child.

Good teachers have always been able to tell us a great deal more about a pupil's achievement than any test.

Going to high school

My child goes to high school next year. He has enjoyed primary a great deal but I wonder how he'll cope with the much larger institution and with having a number of teachers. Any suggestions on what I might do to help in the change-over?

If he has enjoyed his primary years, there is no reason to think that secondary will become a major problem. Experience shows that the great majority of new students settle into the first year of high school very quickly and find the experience exciting and challenging.

There are things you can do, however, to make the transition easier.

- Encourage him to talk about next year. Be very reassuring. Tell about your own good experiences in starting high school.
- Find out all you can about the new school. Go to any information nights that are organised for the parents of new students.
- During the latter part of the Christmas holidays, encourage him to invite over friends who will be going to high school with him. A support group growing up together helps the individual members to feel more confident.
- Find out what avenues for parental participation are available and consider some involvement. This will help you learn about the school at first hand.
- Every high school has a structure whereby one teacher at least has special responsibility for the welfare of each child. Find out who this person is and contact him or her if you have any worries.

Repeating

On the advice of the school Principal my five-year-old daughter is repeating Year 1. Although my husband and I were convinced when the decision was made, we are now having second thoughts. She appeared to be coping all right last year. The main problem seemed to be that she was very young for the grade and rather immature. Have we done the right thing?

Yes. There is a strong case for repetition if a particular child is both significantly younger and less mature than most other children in the class. These young children are often 'at risk', both academically and socially, as they move through childhood into adolescence. Teachers generally suggest that if such a child is to repeat, it is best done early in schooling.

The Gesell Institute of Human Development is a strong supporter of repetition on the grounds of immaturity. 'We have known thousands of children who have been retained,' says Associate Director, Dr Louise Bates Ames, 'and in almost every incidence, the retention was successful.

'Perhaps what is most satisfying are the thanks we receive from adults who assure us that the turning point in their school career came when they were allowed to repeat a grade and thus be properly placed'.

I hasten to add that these remarks of Dr Ames relate to *immaturity* as a justification for repetition. There is lack of evidence to support repetition because of poor achievement or low intellectual ability.

It comes back to the need for parents and teachers to look at each child as an individual and consider his or her long-term interests.

Phonics

I read in a recent news report that American teachers are being told to go back to placing a greater emphasis on phonics in the teaching of reading. What is the status of phonics in Australian schools?

The American debate on phonics is extremely complex and is as much political as educational. There is no likelihood whatsoever of any Australian educational authority pressuring teachers to follow the phonics road.

This controversial approach to the teaching of reading stresses the learning of sounds (phonics) that go with appropriate letters, or groups of letters, and parents may remember early school reading bocks that drilled phonics in such sentences as:

Dan can fan Nan.
The pig is in the pen.
The ox is in the bog.

If children came to rely on this approach, we would soon have a major literacy crisis on our hands. Imagine the agony of a young reader trying to 'sound out' *ho* in such words as *hole, hoist, holly, how, hour, honey* and *honest*!

Some knowledge of phonics is an important aid towards reading. But if this type of instruction is overdone it can create a lot of problems. Teachers often find that the very poor reader has been overdosed on phonics in the early years — and the withdrawal symptoms are most painful.

Good reading teachers at all grade levels insist that there is much more to learning to read than phonics; for example, although children may be drilled and drilled in 'sounds', they may have little success in getting meaning from the page. Nowadays *meaning* is seen as the essence. To read mechanically, without understanding, is to read without pleasure and so become a 'reader' who never wants to read.

Trainee teachers are shown how to use a variety of different approaches, all of which involve the use of language that is interesting as well as predictable, and that approximates the language which the children hear around them. And this means that they have to come up with something more exciting than Dan fanning Nan!

As far as parents are concerned, it is much better to leave the phonics to the teacher. He or she will treat this aspect of reading as the need arises. The parents' best contribution is made through the regular reading of interesting stories to and with the child.

Computers

I would like to buy a home computer as an aid to my child's education. Is there any general advice you can give me?

For a start, don't rush off to the nearest store and make a hasty purchase. Instead, you might begin by talking with friends who have already bought a computer; they will be able to tell you some of the pitfalls and give some indication of how their children use it.

More and more teachers are doing short courses in computer education. So you're quite likely to find someone on the staff of your child's school who will be able to offer specific advice with both the child and the computer in mind.

Try to clarify in your own mind just what you hope to get from your new computer. A lot of parents are eventually disappointed because they expect too much from this new technology. For instance, no matter what advertisers might suggest, most of the programs currently available will not help your child improve in reading, writing and spelling. These skills are best mastered with books, pencils and pieces of paper.

Just as there are, educationally speaking, good and bad books, so there are good and bad computer programs. Those that are genuinely educational excite children's curiosity and encourage them to make investigations and solve problems. Inferior programs stress imitation and simple repetition.

Marking

It seems that teachers are much less conscientious these days in marking children's work. Is there any justification for this?

There was a time when the crossing out of errors by a teacher was seen as evidence of efficiency.

They would regularly go through everything the children had written, red pen at the ready, searching for sin. This took a lot of time and was not always productive. Imagine your work being returned to you, week after week, covered in red marks.

Today's teachers still want children to write correctly; that is, using all the appropriate conventions of spelling, punctuation and grammar.

They believe, however, that the most effective approach does not focus on errors, but rather seeks to build up the child's confidence and enthusiasm while ensuring that habits of conscientious writing, proofreading and checking are developed.

Mistakes are tolerated in note-taking or first-draft writing; here the key concern is with ideas.

However, as the child edits and prepares pieces of writing for readers, close attention is given to correctness. Errors may well be highlighted here, although the teacher may concentrate on the teaching of one or two conventions rather than draw attention to every mistake.

If the work is to be displayed or to become part of a set of reading resources, then the teacher will probably insist that it is as perfectly presented as possible.

Old-style marking took place *after* writing had been done. These days teachers see advice about usage and correction of errors as being part of the process. It may be that there is less red ink used, but what happens is more likely to improve competence in writing.

Competition

What has happened to competition in today's primary schools?

Competition was once a significant feature of primary school life. The competitive urge was used to motivate children to try harder and achieve more. Many parents remember block competitions, table contests, spelling bees, and races for stars, stamps and tokens of all kinds. Each week culminated with tests that spread the children from best to worst, and the grand final was an annual examination which clearly separated the winners from the losers.

This placed a lot of unnecessary pressure on children, especially those who were less assertive and less able. It even had some unfortunate effect on those who did well. While it may have done much to raise their self-esteem, it also defined success for them in terms of being better than other people.

Today, the emphasis is, first, on the individual striving to do the best he or she is capable of, and, second, on the individual working cooperatively as a member of a group for the good of all.

Some people are worried about this emphasis on cooperation. It's a dog-eat-dog world out there, they say; children have to learn to compete if they are to survive!

But surely this is not true. The ones who not only survive but are happy with themselves and in their relationships, and who make a real contribution to society, are those who work and live comfortably with others, caring and cooperating.

Just consider the destructive effect of bringing a competitive orientation to our family life, our neighbourhood, our friendship group and, even, our workplace.

National competitiveness in such things as trade and commerce is one thing. Individual competitiveness that sees doing well only in terms of doing better than others, is quite another.

Presentation

How important is bookwork and general presentation in today's schools?

Children are encouraged to take pride in their work. They display this by presenting their work neatly and attractively. Apart from everything else, this is an act of courtesy to those who will read what has been written.

On the other hand, most of the written work is done under workshop conditions. The children are jotting down notes, writing first impressions, arranging and rearranging ideas in the same way as their parents and teachers do when they are making lists or using writing to work through thoughts and plans.

Much of the children's work, therefore, will reflect this working-through process and will be somewhat untidy. However, when their work is for display or presentation in some other way, it demands that extra care.

We must be careful not to judge a child's schoolwork solely on what appears in notebooks and in folders.

Teachers work towards achieving the school's aims in a variety of ways. Group discussions, talks to the class, drama, art, music, classroom displays, outdoor activities, — all are part of the learning process.

Independence

How can I help my child to become more independent?

Mature people think independently, make choices and take responsibility for their actions. Developing these capacities is one of the most important educational goals which parents and teachers share for their children.

Children have to *learn* to be independent. They therefore need experiences that allow them:

- to make choices
- to make mistakes which are seen as part of learning
- to exercise responsibility
- to express their own opinions.

The nature of these experiences must vary according to the age of the child and the general circumstances. But in any reflection on how a particular child is growing towards maturity, conscientious parents and teachers would do well to consider whether or not the child is having adequate opportunity to engage in the above four behaviours.

Library monitors develop a sense of responsibility while performing a service vital to the school community.

Talking with children

I want my child to talk to me about school so that I can express interest, support and reassurance. However, if I say 'How was school today?' all I get is 'OK'. Or, 'What did you do today?' 'Nuthin much.' Any hints?

Of course some parents — those who have to listen to a minute-by-minute description of each day's happenings — might think you're lucky. But, seriously, you are so very right in seeking to get this conversation going.

Sometimes it's a good idea to give children time to unwind when they arrive home. After a snack and a game outside, they may have established a bit of psychological distance from school and be able to talk about the day with more ease.

Without making a big thing of it, ask some specific questions about friends, or about something you know would have happened. When children bring home written work and other material — paintings, craftwork, bulletins and so on — these can often trigger discussion.

Some parents find it's best to wait until the day is drawing to a close and the children are being tucked away. Then in the ritual of bathing, saying 'goodnight', story-reading and preparing for sleep, tales can be told and confidences shared.

If you really want to have a positive influence on your children...

- Spend time with them. Read, play, share activities, express feelings, talk about successes, difficulties, uncertainties, plans....
- Provide a safe environment where life is predictable and where routines and relationships help people to be calm and relaxed.
- Provide challenges. Open opportunities to learn new skills, to collect, to play, to cultivate, to relate, to help, to make....
- Praise specifically. Recognize and name strengths and achievements.
- Have high expectations — of conduct as well as of achievement.
- Help set achievable goals and have clear guidelines for behaviour.
- Know who the children's friends are and what they are doing.
- Don't put your worries on the children's shoulders.
- Make sure the children have a balanced diet and enjoy plenty of exercise.
- Give moral guidance. Know your values and demonstrate them clearly both in what you say and in what you do.

Composite classes

Are composite classes educationally sound?

A composite class is formed by combining children from two or more grades. The arrangement is unpopular in many communities, especially where people have had no previous experience of composite classes.

On the other hand, some families, particularly in country areas, have known composite classes all through the primary schooling of their children, and they often prefer them.

Parents who are worried are usually those whose children are in the higher grade; they fear that the progress of their children may be slowed down by the younger group. They are aware, too, that the arrangement requires teachers who have special competence in handling groups of children who are of different ages and working at different levels.

Supporters of composite classes argue that *every* class is composite in that it has pupils of different abilities progressing at different rates. Teachers, they say, have a variety of strategies, which they use in whatever class they teach, for ensuring that individual differences are provided for and that children progress in the manner most appropriate to each one.

It is frequently maintained that classes with children of different ages offer special advantages, encouraging a more cooperative atmosphere in which the children feel safe working at their own level.

This is a contentious issue. While composite classes can be educationally very sound, their management requires certain attitudes and skills on the part of the teachers concerned. It's a topic that is most profitably discussed directly at the local level.

Parents and the School

So many of the parents who took the trouble to participate in our survey mentioned the importance of parent-teacher communication. They know from experience how much easier it is to solve problems, to feel reassured and to be confident in what is happening in the classroom when there are open channels of communication between home and school.

At the beginning of this book, I noted that school is most likely to do its work effectively when it supports and is supported by the home, and when the relationship between parents and teachers is characterised by mutual respect, confidence, friendship and a sense of genuine partnership.

Some parents have no difficulty in approaching the school and getting to know the teachers. They feel comfortable in sharing information about their children, expressing appreciation, voicing their concerns and, in general, 'keeping tabs' on the place and the people. They are known and respected, and their presence and contribution are welcomed.

Other parents, for many different reasons, are reluctant to make too many appearances around the school. Some may be hampered by lack of fluency in English; many work and simply do not have the time available; and there are those who just don't feel at ease in talking with teachers.

The school has to reach out with a very special welcome to such parents, making provision for them so that they play a more active role, if they possibly can, in the school community.

Teachers are only human

Most teachers establish very supportive relationships with parents. Others seem more reserved and less approachable. It is important to understand this reserve, which is sometimes seen as unfriendliness or defensiveness.

Some teachers would dearly like to communicate better but they often lack the confidence to do so. They are expected to implement new teaching approaches which are often not understood by the community at large. Sometimes they don't have the communication skills to explain the reasons for changes in teaching practices, even though they use the new methods quite effectively.

They are hurt by constant media attacks on school teachers and they know that a lot of parents are influenced by these negative reports. This can make them feel very defensive.

Also, some of their experiences with irate parents have been very unpleasant. If a teacher is personally abused, criticized or accused of not doing the job properly, then obviously he or she will be wary of similar situations arising in the future. Such a person may learn to expect more blame than praise, more criticism than appreciation.

While teachers are the full-time professionals who have the responsibility for taking the initiative in welcoming parents and establishing close links with them, there are some things that parents can do to strengthen the relationship and make the task of the teacher, in this regard, somewhat easier.

- Try to get to know the teacher personally. At the beginning of the year write a note introducing yourself or, if the teacher is new, welcoming him or her.
- During the year, give feedback about things that please you — your child's growing interest in school, some class activity that seemed to go particularly well, some kind gesture that gave your child particular pleasure....
- If possible, attend functions and express support for the teacher's effort and the time given in organizing them.

When you have to complain

Because teachers are human beings, with all the inadequacies, frustrations and weaknesses possessed by our species, there will be times when things go wrong.

Sometimes they may go so wrong that parents feel that they just have to do something. A child may be very upset because of a perceived injustice; learning may not seem to be taking place; inappropriate demands may be placed on the children; the climate of the classroom may appear to be characterized by fear and oppression.

These sorts of things *can* happen, and parents have a responsibility to look for a solution.

And though major crises may never arise, there are sometimes those irritations and concerns that niggle away, reducing the confidence a parent should have in the school. But then there's the old fear that forces many parents to bite their tongue and say nothing — 'If I rock the boat in any way, will my child be victimized or ignored?'

Here is a basic plan that is worth considering when you want to approach the school with a problem.

1 Don't, whatever you do, begin by writing an angry letter containing accusations and threats.

2 Make an appointment, or at least think carefully about the best time to approach the teacher. It would be most inappropriate to interrupt a class or to catch the teacher while he or she is busy supervising children or on bus duty.

3 Approach the teacher in a friendly and open manner. Remember, you may not have the full story. Present the situation as a possible misunderstanding you need to clarify, or as a problem you are seeking the teacher's help in solving.

4 You might begin by expressing overall appreciation or, at least, an understanding of obvious difficulties. It is certainly not in your interest to come on strongly and force the teacher into a defensive position.

5 Try to conclude the interview with a clear indication that you understand the pressures on the teacher and that you are simply looking for a way of solving a problem that may have resulted from sheer misunderstanding.

6 If, after a little time, it appears that the outcomes of the interview have been satisfactory, write a note of appreciation and offer continuing support.

7 If difficulties continue, you may have to approach the Principal in much the same way. But, before then, do everything you can to communicate with the teacher in a friendly manner.

The parent-teacher interview

A very popular method that schools have for communicating with parents is the parent-teacher interview. This is often timed to coincide with the delivery of a written report on each child, and provides opportunity for discussion of this, along with other issues that are relevant to the particular child.

While most parents see these interviews as extremely useful and informative, quite a few are not sure what constructive line of questioning they might use. What comes next after you've asked: 'How's young Trevor going?'

The teacher, of course, provides information without necessarily being questioned. But it is a good idea for parents to have in mind some questions like the ones which follow. Once these are answered, the parent has a reasonable thumb-nail sketch.

- Does the child have particular strengths that I should build on?
- Are there significant weaknesses (e.g. unable to cope with aspects of the work, slowness in asking for help...)?
- Does he or she get on well with other children? Make friends easily? Share and cooperate?
- Is his or her behaviour in the classroom acceptable? If not, what can we do about it?
- Is he or she generally happy in school and getting sufficient experience of success?
- Is there anything that should happen as a result of this interview? More regular communication with the teacher? More time spent with the child? Special reassurance and encouragement on certain days? Some change in the home routine?

It is always a good policy to end the interview with some expression of friendship and confidence in the teacher, and assurances of support. The normal practice would be for the teacher to make similar comments and thereby strengthen the partnership.

Case study

Karen New had never felt worse in all her life. Her palms were clammy, her mouth dry and she knew that the jumper she'd bought with her first pay cheque was now no more than a sponge soaking up the perspiration she couldn't control.

It was her first parent/teacher evening; she'd started work six weeks before.

'Miss New, I demand to know why you have abandoned the homework system used by Mrs Grimm last year. How can we monitor the progress...?'

Karen's eyes tried to focus on the angry face of the lady in the front desk.

'And what about tables? I'm not interested in hearing about plastic shapes and bundles of sticks!'

Before Karen could identify the new questioner, a rather burly man leaning against the fish tank sensed the growing mood of the meeting and went in for the kill.

'Speaking as an employer, I'm sick and tired of trendy education that is turning out a nation of illiterates....'

Karen tried to speak but nothing would come. How could she tell them about her own confusion in these early weeks of teaching, her sense of inadequacy and her great need for support and reassurance?

'And what about grammar? Why, only today....'

'Stop! Please stop!' she said, and bursting into tears she ran from the room.

How could such a situation ever arise? What's the solution?

The involvement of parents

All over Australia, parents are variously involved in the lives of the schools attended by their children. This is a most desirable feature of modern primary schooling.

Various structures have been established by the different schools and systems of education to keep parents informed and to provide for such involvement. What follows here is a sample of typical activities, grouped under four basic headings.

1 Communication

Schools have many ways of informing parents about school life and about the progress of children. They also have methods of gathering information about the children that will help them to serve the children more efficiently. Here are some examples.

Newsletters. Some of these are published in languages other than English in areas of high migrant density.

Reports. Frequently these are associated with parent-teacher interviews.

Notes explaining the curriculum. These are sometimes distributed and explained at parent-teacher meetings and during interviews with individual parents.

Surveys. By means of these, schools seek parental opinion about local issues — policies, routines and the like.

Community liaison. Some schools have people whose task it is to visit homes, advise parents and, in general, draw the community closer to the school.

2 Invitation

Parents are invited to come into the school to view displays, to talk with teachers, to attend celebrations and to observe aspects of school life. Here are some of the provisions that are made for this.

Parent-teacher evenings. Aspects of the curriculum are explained and parents discuss their child with the teacher.

Classes for parents. These may be single-evening sessions or they may extend over a number of evenings. They frequently treat such topics as Language Teaching, Sex Education, Mathematics, Computers in Learning, Child Development, Discipline....

Displays of children's work. These provide a 'window' through which parents and other community members can glimpse what is happening at school. They are particularly popular at such special times as Education Week, but in a great number of schools children's work is continuously displayed in vestibules and corridors.

Special celebrations. Parents are frequently invited to see the children celebrate such events as Book Week, Heritage Week, multi-cultural days, Easter and Christmas, and join in activities linked to days that are significant to particular ethnic groups.

Added to all of these are the regular concerts, dramatic productions, school dances, sporting events and picnics.

3 Participation

P&C and P&F Associations provide many parents with the opportunity to involve themselves in a more structured way in supporting the school and to share in some expression of the parental 'voice' in education through the development of the policies of their associations. Some of the areas in which parents can actively help to support and develop the school's life and work are these.

Curriculum planning. Most primary schools have some form of parental input into what is taught and learnt. Parents are often consulted in the development of homework and discipline policies and the evaluation of the school's curriculum as a whole.

Classroom help. Nearly all primary schools have parents participating in some way in the actual teaching-learning program. This is particularly the case in literacy programs, where they read to children, hear reading, assist with the conferencing of writing, type children's stories for publication and so on.

Helping with publication: many parents make a valuable contribution to classroom life.

Clerical/Library. Parents offer practical assistance in typing and filing, in covering and repairing books, and provide help to individual children.

Special projects. Most schools have parents participating in special projects that support the curriculum. These include excursions, creative leisure activities, community service programs, and a wide variety of sporting activities.

Liaison with other parents. Parents are frequently involved in groups or committees whose task it is to support other parents and draw them into the wider community. Their activities include offering special hospitality to new parents, organizing such events as craft mornings for parents, maintaining a sole parents support group and making home visits on behalf of the school's parent organisation.

Other supporting activities. These include working bees, clothing pools, tuckshop and a wide variety of social events usually organized by the P&C/P&F Association.

4 Governance

Although the degree to which parents are involved in setting a school's policies and determining its overall priorities varies from state to state and from system to system, there are certainly many examples to be found of School Boards and School Councils in different parts of Australia.

So...What is a Good School?

I hope that this book has provided some insights into modern primary education at its best. A school that offers this kind of education is likely to be a good school — and Australia has some of the best primary schools in the world!

How, then, can we sum up the type of primary education outlined in this book?

Over recent years, researchers in many countries have tried to find out what it is that makes a particular school especially good — both for the children who go there and the community it serves. It seems that the best schools have qualities that can be grouped under these headings.

Leadership

Good schools are run by good principals — men and women who have a deep understanding of children and learning, who really care for people, who build the community, and who are able to lead their teachers and develop strong professional teams in which everyone feels involved and responsible.

Clear goals

In good schools, teachers, parents and children have a clear idea of where they are going. They share a sense of common purpose.

Climate

There is a certain 'feel' about a good school. There is a sense of safety and belonging, but also one of challenge and achievement. High expectations abound. There is an appropriate mixture of freedom and discipline, and individuals have a sense of confidence in the institution and those who manage it.

Community

The members of a good school community have a deep sense of belonging. They welcome new members and seek to involve others in decision making. The community is involved in the life of the school and generates confidence in it.

Curriculum

The good school is seen as a place of growth and learning. Individual differences are provided for. The basics of literacy and numeracy are well attended to, but the

curriculum is properly balanced and places important emphasis on the creative arts and the other elements that make up a full primary program. In this kind of curriculum, children learn how to learn, how to apply knowledge, how to care for themselves, other people and the environment. They are learning to live fully as children who will one day be happy, compassionate and competent adults.

How parents can make a good school better...

- Make an effort to understand what the school is trying to do. If you can, express your support for its aims and the values it expresses.
- If at all possible, participate on committees and in discussion groups that consider educational issues and give opinions to the staff.
- See the school as 'your' school. Encourage your children to see it in the same way.
- By all means offer constructive criticism and suggestions, but direct your comments to the right people. Don't 'bad mouth' the school in the general community.
- Go to school activities — open days, plays, concerts, picnics, sporting functions, celebrations. Take a friend.
- Join the official parent group and look after the school's interests.
- Welcome new parents. Help them feel that they belong. Build their confidence in the school.
- Support a broad and balanced curriculum. Resist attempts by any pressure groups to narrow the curriculum to things that are purely functional and measurable.
- Encourage your children to cooperate fully, to join in all school activities and to take a pride in the buildings, the grounds and the school community as a whole.
- Let the Principal and the teachers know that you support them all the way, even if sometimes you have to be a friendly critic or a critical friend.

Parents Teachers Partners was shaped by a survey that reached between 40,000 and 50,000 parents and teachers.

It identifies the main features of primary schooling about which parents seek information, and in a succession of well-defined sections it explains in straightforward language what is happening in today's classrooms.

It is presented to educating communities as a resource and a stimulus for fostering the essential partnership that must exist between parents and teachers if the nation's schools are to flourish as they should.

Barry Dwyer is the author or co-author of eleven books and has published hundreds of articles on various aspects of Australian education.

A former teacher, counsellor, consultant and lecturer, he is currently a Regional Director with the Sydney Catholic Education Office.

Barry has had a lifetime interest in fostering the partnership of parents and teachers. He was President of PETA from 1979 to 1984.

PETA, the Primary English Teaching Association, is an independent, national, non-profit organization of teachers. It has continued to grow every year since its formation in 1972 on the strength of its enviable record of publications.

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